



Shutterstock photo

# The Whole New Ballgame of Social Media

Brad Lavigne

*The disruptive innovation of social media in election campaigning really began with the Obama campaign of 2008. But that was before Twitter took hold. Now, the perpetual publication cycle of social media has revolutionized everything about Canadian election campaigns, from supporter mobilization to media relations. The most important thing to know about the 2015 federal election campaign and social media is: It's already started.*

We sat silently in the make-shift holding room in Ottawa's National Arts Centre. I was with Karl Belanger, Jack's Layton's senior press secretary, and we were listening to the closed-circuit TV feed of the 2011 federal leaders' debate taking place live just a few meters away.

We were also intently monitoring our Twitter feeds on our Blackberries to see what members of the National Press Gallery, candidates, campaign staff, volunteers, supporters and opponents were saying about the debate. We were in the first hour of the English language debate and Jack was about to use a line in the debate to challenge Stephen Harper on the issue of youth crime prevention. We didn't know precisely when he was go-

ing to use it, and we had no idea what the reaction was going to be.

Then it happened. In an appeal for effective youth diversion programs and a critique of Conservative policies on youth and crime, Jack wrapped up his interjection with a line we knew was coming: “That’s been a hashtag fail.”

According to the *Globe and Mail*, the phrase “was seized upon gleefully by the Canadian Twitterverse; ‘hashtag fail’ was a trending topic for hours after the NDP leader’s remark, generating thousands of tweets and re-tweets.”

The line worked because it was well-delivered, authentic and it got thousands of debate watchers, especially the media reporting on the debate, talking about the leader of the fourth party who, at the time, was dead last in the polls.

But equally important, it became the point in Canadian federal politics when the lexicon of social media, in this case Twitter (barely around in the previous election), had quickly found its way into the Canadian political arena, leaving many non-Twitter savvy Canadians to ask, “What’s a hashtag?”

In social media terms, the 2011 election campaign could be described as the “Twitter campaign.” Facebook, YouTube, and even blogs all emerged over the previous decade as important social media tools used by political parties in the lead-up to and during the 2000, 2004, 2006 and 2008 election campaigns.

Social media and digital campaigning have fast become the latest frontier and a permanent fixture for political practitioners of the modern campaign. With the next election right around the corner, the question isn’t, “Will social media be important in the 2015 campaign?” Rather, the question is, “How will social media further evolve the way in which political parties campaign in Canada?”

**W**hy have social media and online campaigning become so important in Ca-

**Canadians spend more time online than people in almost any country in the world. In its 2013 annual survey, the Canadian Internet Research Authority found, on average, Canadians spend over 40 hours per month online, more than any country except for the United States.**

nadian politics? The short answer is because that’s where Canadians are. They’re online, and they’re using social media on their desktops, tablets and smart phones.

In fact, Canadians spend more time online than people in almost any country in the world. In its 2013 annual survey, the Canadian Internet Research Authority found, on average, Canadians spend over 40 hours per month online, more than any country except for the United States.

According to Facebook Canada, more than 19 million Canadians log on to their Facebook account at least once a month and 14 million check their Facebook newsfeed every day—including over nine million who do this daily ritual on their mobile device. Meanwhile, Twitter has 5.6 million monthly users in Canada, second only to the United Kingdom in terms of percentage of the population.

These social media tools have created new channels for politicians and campaigners (and businesses) to recruit, engage and mobilize supporters—all without leaving the campaign headquarters:

**Recruiting:** Social media helps political parties by organizing Canadians into groups, whether it’s geographic, typographic, demographic, or categories less tangible but equally as valuable, such as interests and values. That’s why social media is a key source for leads for practitioners to find and cultivate their supportive communities.

**Engagement:** Social media and the digital campaign allows for constant engagement of the supportive community. This allows supporters to receive ongoing information from their preferred political party that helps reinforce their support, gives them a sense of belonging and serves as an

outlet for input into party activities.

These tools have helped usher in the Permanent Campaign in Canada.

**These tools have helped usher in the Permanent Campaign in Canada. Parties are no longer interested in talking to supporters merely in the lead-up to the campaign. Rather, they seek to engage them in between election cycles and social media serves as an excellent conduit for this work.**

Parties are no longer interested in talking to supporters merely in the lead-up to the campaign. Rather, they seek to engage them in between election cycles and social media serves as an excellent conduit for this work.

Through 140 characters on Twitter or a Facebook social sharable, war rooms can cheaply and effectively communicate their message—or push out opposition research—that, in the past, would have required press releases and willing journalists. Social media now allows for this campaigning to go on unfiltered as part of constant engagement.

**Mobilization:** The culmination of these steps is to mobilize the community. The call to action may be to donate money, volunteer time, recruit friends and family, and, of course, get out and vote. Political parties are constantly asking people to take action because when it does come time to vote on election day, they are more likely to do so than if their first activity was to vote on E-Day.

It’s not just the use of social media

platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, Facebook and Tumblr; politics has been altered dramatically by the entire online digital space and the tools that come with it.

**T**he increasing segmentation of the Canadian audience has accelerated the value of the digital and social media world. Today, both in politics and in the private sector, we can micro-target a message with a level of precision unheard of just a few years ago. Messages can now be customized and delivered not just to a city, an electoral district or even a postal code, but based on users' digital footprints.

**Today, both in politics and in the private sector, we can micro-target a message with a level of precision unheard of just a few years ago. Messages can now be customized and delivered not just to a city, an electoral district or even a postal code, but based on users' digital footprints.**

We can now speak to individuals cheaply and effectively, and can customize the message that works best for them. This specialization means more work for political parties—but it also helps to ensure they are delivering the best message to the most receptive audience.

**E**verything in the social media and digital campaign sphere is measurable. This allows us to constantly test and refine the messaging. In traditional media, a party takes out an ad in a newspaper. You know what the circulation of that day's edition—usually plumped for sales purposes—but that is it. How many people who subscribe or bought the paper looked at your ad? You have no way of knowing.

With online ads, we can measure click-throughs, how long the person

**With online ads, we can measure click-throughs, how long the person spent on the page, and through heat mapping, you can track the reader's interests by mapping where their pointer goes. This data helps campaign practitioners test, refine, make adjustments and be far more strategic in delivering the right message to the right person.**

spent on the page, and through heat mapping, you can track the reader's interests by mapping where their pointer goes. This data helps campaign practitioners test, refine, make adjustments and be far more strategic in delivering the right message to the right person.

Despite all the important and exciting opportunities offered by these digital tools, it would be a mistake to suggest that social media will replace other, more traditional aspects of recruiting, engaging or mobilizing. Social media augments rather than replaces the telephone or door-to-door canvass. As long as voting still consists of a registered voter marking an 'X' at a polling station in person, then the human connection will still be extremely important.

Conversely, social media and the digital world have created an unprecedented level of intimacy and access to politicians by regular people.

For the politician, these tools allow an unfiltered vehicle to send messages, either through tagged tweets or messages on their Facebook timeline.

Prior to these tools, an activist might have mailed a letter to a leader or waited in line to shake their hand and have a quick word at a rally if they came through their town. Today, any person with a Twitter or Facebook account can have instant and direct access to a politician.

This intimacy allows politicians to extend their brand by communicating in an unfiltered way with an individual or group. For instance, Calgary Mayor Naheed Nenshi helps his fellow citizens find lost cats and helps promote safety during floods by retweeting messages from individuals to his 204,000 followers. Twitter, though, doesn't create

the persona, it merely amplifies it through an authentic use of it.

**S**ocial media also amplifies the so-called bozo eruptions. In previous campaigns, if a candidate at an all-candidates meeting said something off- message, or worse—it may have made it into the local newspaper at some point. Today, missteps of leaders or candidates become instant national stories, regardless of where they took place.

The coordinated effort by parties to destabilize their opponents also means old postings on blogs or Facebook now come back to haunt candidates of all major parties, throwing parties off their message. This has forced opposition research units to undertake a new level of crisis communications that didn't exist just a few campaigns ago.

Social media is accelerating the rate at which modern campaigning is evolving.

The 2015 election will be the longest, nastiest and most expensive campaign in Canadian history. It will be the most targeted and sophisticated as well, which is why to the average observer, they won't even realize that the campaign is already well underway and they are already a part of it. **P**

*Contributing Writer Brad Lavigne, vice-president of H&K Strategies in Ottawa, was director of communications and later principal secretary to Jack Layton as Leader of the Opposition. He is the author of the bestselling Building the Orange Wave. [lavigne.brad@gmail.com](mailto:lavigne.brad@gmail.com)*