



Justin Trudeau in another selfie moment that drove his coverage on social media. Andrew MacDougall writes: "Meet the new normal." Adam Scotti photo.

How Social Was it? The Team that Won the Web War Won the Campaign

Andrew MacDougall

Every campaign since Barack Obama's 2008 successful run for the United States presidency has been described as the first truly social media campaign. In Canada's 2015 federal election campaign, the playing field had changed. Justin Trudeau lived through the race on social media the same way many of the people under 40 who voted for him live—naturally. His older, more conventional rivals were out-selfied, out-tweeted and outrun.

In the week following this fall's federal election the leaders' Twitter accounts fell silent. Instagram feeds remained stuck on October 19, the political Hiroshima of voting day. Facebook pages went without updates. Well, all but one leader's, of course. On October 20, Justin Trudeau's digital channels pushed out the images and messages of a leader busy at work in his new role as Prime Minister-designate of Canada.

What role did social media play in the 42nd federal election? Did the bouquets and brickbats traded over Twitter help push Trudeau over the top? Were local campaigns able to use social media to get out their vote? Or were they largely a distraction, a forum for tripping up candidates and drumming them off the campaign stage?

Much—perhaps too much—has been written about social media and its ability to influence political outcomes. President Barack Obama is frequently held up as the poster boy for digital change; his rise from outsider to Commander-in-Chief is often attributed to his ability to connect with younger generations through these new communications platforms.

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But are these channels the key to reaching young voters who are disenchanted and disengaged with politics? Or are they only as strong as the source material behind them? If the leader and the message aren't compelling or engaging, can they be dressed up that way online?

While digital channels were in existence during the last federal election in 2011, this was to be the first Canadian campaign where they were to play a significant, if not central, role. With fewer of us watching so-called “linear” television, the digital playground was to be a significant front

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in the advertising war. Did it play out that way?

Upon first glance, the numbers certainly sound impressive. For example, seven million Facebook users contributed to over 50 million interactions about the election, including posts, likes, comments and shares. There were over 3.2 million tweets tagged with the #elxn42 hashtag on Twitter, five times more than the last go around. New channels like Instagram were populated with photos of the leaders and their campaigns on a daily basis. Parties plonked their ads online.

But did any of it *matter*?

While it's too early yet to fully quantify the impact that digital and social media had on this campaign, early returns show that Trudeau and his team did a better job of bringing their preferred ballot question of “change” to the electorate via digital platforms.

And of course, there were also digital attacks; indeed, the most significant effects had nothing to do with the use of social media during the campaign, they were about what candidates said there before they started campaigning.

Every campaign features the removal of a candidate or two for boneheaded-ness. But the bloody digital parade from the 42nd campaign was *sans pareil*. Meet the new normal; the urge to commit our every thought and emotion to the digital ether isn't going to go away. The next generation of candidates will have lived their lives in public long before they get into public life. And that, as we've now witnessed, has consequences.

First, the Conservatives turfed a Montreal candidate for promoting

the NDP on Facebook (whoops). The NDP then punted a Nova Scotia candidate for her own Facebook misdeeds, wherein she suggested that Israel engaged in “ethnic cleansing”. Next, up it was the Liberals, who lost a Calgary-area candidate over a series of controversial tweets drafted when she was a teenager (she's now 21). Not to be outdone, Conservative Gilles Guibord was sent overboard for making sexist remarks in the comments section of a newspaper's website. And in perhaps the campaign's most memorable social media snafu, the NDP's Alex Johnstone made rude comments under a picture of Auschwitz in 2008 and then confessed to a reporter in 2015 that she didn't know what Auschwitz was.

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Of course, digital and social channels didn't make candidates do and say stupid things; they've always done and said stupid things. All these platforms have done is preserve them is aspic so they can be unearthed by political research teams at the opportune moment. Social media doesn't kill candidates, stupid candidates kill candidates.

Gaffes aside, digital and social platforms did play a more positive role in framing the leaders in their bids to be prime minister. For Harper, the chosen message was “proven leadership” and for the two opposition leaders the digital pitch was for “change”.

It was the latter that proved the more powerful online. And it was the Liberals that deployed it more effectively. In many ways, it was an open door on which to push; research demonstrates that people prefer to share positive material on their social channels. By way of contrast, only the committed partisan is ready to sling mud in the service of their preferred party on public channels. Trudeau’s pledges of optimism and “hope and hard work” were therefore better suited to mass distribution on social media than Harper’s dire warnings of economic chaos, or Tom Mulcair’s more measured appeal for a responsible and serious NDP government.

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The medium is also better suited to Trudeau’s personality. A strong retail politician, Trudeau clearly relishes the crowds and encouraged lots of personal contact. This also translated into lots of selfies for both his, and his admirers’, social channels. It contributed to a digitally palpable sense of momentum, especially in the campaign’s final weeks; almost every Trudeau post, tweet,

and picture in the run-up to e-day referenced crowds of people touting “change”.

In contrast, Stephen Harper’s digital efforts were rote, business-like, and devoid of emotion—much like the caricature of the man himself. They attempted to generate engagement and issue support but rarely succeeded at reaching beyond his core supporters. Meanwhile, Mulcair’s annoying habit of posting messages in the third person on his Twitter feed matched his campaign’s overall discomfort at playing the role of “centrist” New Democrats. The whole point of these channels is authenticity and it came through that both Harper and Mulcair weren’t digital natives.

Of course, Harper and Mulcair are political *natives*, and it was in the raw politics that their advantage over Trudeau was supposed to lie. Both the Conservative and NDP presumed that Trudeau would mispeak his way into a gaffe worthy of rebroadcasting through advertising.

Unfortunately for them, not only did Trudeau avoid any serious errors, his (federally) novice campaign team also came up with the more effective advertising and then deployed it more effectively online.

The proof is in the pudding: the Liberals’ advertising generated more views online than either of their main opponents, across all platforms. They also (largely) stuck to a sunnier tone, in keeping with Trudeau’s main themes of positivity and change.

First, the Liberals took the Conservatives’ main attack head on, with Trudeau repeating the Tory negative and declaring himself “ready” to govern. And then, in the ad of the campaign, he enlisted 94-year old former Mississauga mayor Hazel McCallion to rebut Harper’s assertions that Trudeau would cut benefits for seniors. It was an original and compelling way to derail a Harper attack—and it quickly generated

250,000 views online in the final week of the campaign.

The Liberals also made the most effective use of their owned channels to encourage people to “go knock doors” and vote. Without these types of calls to action, social posts are no more valuable than hot air.

In the end, it was fatigue with Harper and his political style that propelled the desire for change. Canadians had two options for that change; as long as Mr. Harper was able to keep Justin Trudeau and Tom Mulcair competitive with each other, he had a chance for political survival.

By performing ably on the stump and in debates, and by driving his ballot question of change both on and offline, Trudeau was able to overtake the NDP and become Canada’s 23rd prime minister.

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And while it is tempting to credit digital and social media with the Trudeau victory, in the end they were only reflections of a candidate that was better-prepared, determined to be positive, and comfortable in his own skin. After nearly ten years of the cool calculations of Harper, Canadians were ready to step into the sun. **P**

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