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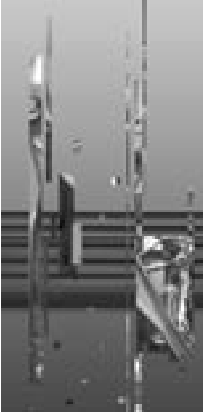

MEDIA POLL-ITICS IN CANADIAN ELECTIONS: A REPORT ON ACCELERATED PUBLIC OPINION

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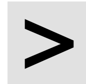
ABSTRACT **This essay develops a technocultural studies approach to political elections and polling. First, I shift our attention from polling as a cultural form to developments in polling technology that are transfiguring this form. I then examine the production and circulation of political opinion during the 2004 and 2006 Canadian elections in order to expose the limits of the media's criticism of polling and to contend that published preelection polls contribute to the formation of suspicious subjects. I go on to argue that political campaign communication is open to information accidents so that politicians get elected not just because of what they**

say, or how they say it, but when they say it. Within the accelerated serial mix of public opinion, stories, commentary, and events, political support and momentum were articulated with the politicization of affect to shape the outcome. While preelection polls may not produce knowledge of public opinion, they are a political technology and a vector of power.

KEYWORDS: elections, public opinion, polling technology, information dynamics, public affect



The history of elections and polling is a long one and the list of those who have criticized polls for their part in the degeneration of public discourse is as long as that of those who have advocated the democratic impetus behind polling (Gallup 1938). Twenty-seven years ago Marshall McLuhan predicted "representative government, which has been based on majority rule and nose-counting procedures, will yield to pollstergeists – the culture-mind readers" (1980: 33). In liberal-democratic theory, these developments represent the fulfilment of a long-standing desire for more direct, responsive, nondeferred democracy. For Paul Virilio, the acceleration of public opinion information is conducive to political populism of the worst kind:

> *Live* democracy, or automatic democracy, eliminates . . . reflection and replaces it with a reflex. Ratings replace elections, and the microchip card replaces deliberation. This is extremely dangerous for democracy in terms of the decision and voting time. Ratings and polls become electoral. The poll is the election of tomorrow, virtual democracy for a virtual city. (1999: 87; italics in original)

In this critique, polling is a technique of forward communication where thought and time, democracy and duration, part company. In a network society of control, "the *standardization* of the public opinion of the industrial era will suddenly give way to the *synchronization* of a public emotion that is liable to sweep away any representative democracy" (Virilio 2005a: 29–30; italics in original). This critique of technics, temporality, and the transnational "democracy of emotion" (Virilio 2005b) needs to be refined at the level of the political process within specific nation states.

Previous Canadian research has discussed the development, use, and abuse of polls (Taras 1990; Fletcher 1996), and demonstrated how polls have become integral to "horse-race" journalism (Andersen 2000). The overriding issue has been the accuracy of polls and the effect of published polls on voters' decision making. Criticism has centered on methodological problems and their underreporting, and arguments have been made about bandwagon, underdog,

demotivating, motivating, strategic, and free-will effects on voters. Unlike other accounts of eroding political involvement and democratic malaise (Dalton 2004; Nadeau and Glasson 2005), a technocultural approach to media poll-itics sees media and informational culture as playing a primary role in political discourse. Polling is a technocultural form that circulates *between* media and citizens and *within* journalistic and political fields. I consider the impact of media poll-itics to be an outcome that emerges from the interplay among pollsters, journalists, politicians, and the informational dynamics of campaigns. In what follows, I review recent work on polling as a cultural form to foreground the question of polling technology. This is followed by an overview of the 2004 election that focuses on the interplay of political recognition, informational dynamics, and public opinion/affect. I conclude with some observations about political momentum from the 2006 election.

UNDERSTANDING MEDIA POLL-ITICS

In the US political context, Justin Lewis (2001) provides a sophisticated analysis of polls as popular cultural forms that represent and construct the "public" in ways that maintain support for unrepresentative democracy. Drawing on an encoding/decoding model, he distinguishes two steps. First, opinion is encoded by pollsters. Second, polling data or reports are transformed by reporters and editors into media texts. At this reencoding stage, "the technology of polling often disappears altogether" (ibid.: 33). In this interdisciplinary approach the meanings of publicized poll responses are contingent upon broader discursive conditions that make some opinions more plausible or connected to political discourse and policy. During election campaigns, however, "horse-race" polls predominate over policy-preference polls. To measure which party or candidate is leading, they ask people to respond to variations of the same question: "If the election were held today/tomorrow, which party/candidate would you vote for/favor?" When the electorate's political choice is captured in the form of a consumer-preference question, people are said to be alienated from politics. When statistics circulate at higher velocities, we encounter something worse than alienation: polls are "obscene," simulated feedback, "useless hyperinformation," which depart from the scene of the social, because the social has no time to enact itself, it has no public or political space (Baudrillard 1988: 210–11). What is at stake here is the *meaning* of political opinion information. Lewis presumes that poll responses signify something more than consumer culture, that they are a space of political response, perhaps even a site of political resistance. Baudrillard presumes polls are mostly meaningless, but he still finds they have a trace of "positive meaning," as an "ironic mirror for the use of the masses" (1988: 212).

However, there is an alternative way of conceptualizing how polls might be involved in the production of political reality that does not

limit our attention to their meaning(lessness). In recent work by Gaonkar and Povinelli (2003), Terranova (2004a, 2004b), Slack and Wise (2005), and Dean (2005) the study of cultural forms encompasses technological change, the circulation of myriad co-present forms, informational dynamics, and articulations. This work foregrounds "cultures of circulation and transfiguration, rather than meaning and translation" (Gaonkar and Povinelli 2003: 387); culture is made up of "myriad articulations (intermingling elements, connections, relationships) that make some things possible, others not" (Slack and Wise 2005: 112). The techno-informational dimension is the milieu within which cultural forms emerge, are interpreted, and function in a network society. The task is to map the milieu within which "different uses and effects are both possible and effective" (Slack and Wise 2005: 113).

Pollsters believe preelection polls are techniques for seeing collective voting behavior in advance and for reducing the margin of indeterminacy in the political future. They claim that "there is a symbiotic relationship amongst pollsters, the media, politicians and the electorate" (Graves 2004: 8). They oppose any ban on the publication of results because they see voting as analogous to investing in the stock market; voters should not be denied knowledge of voting behavior to secure what they see as the best results. But these numbers do not merely provide information that will allow the exercise of individual, rational choice; they are an "*instrument of forecast* or *simulation*" (Champagne 1997: 5; italics in original). "The political opinion poll . . . fits into the very general process of rationalizing action ('helping towards the decision' as the pollsters say), which makes particular use of the resources offered by social science" (Champagne 1997: 5). However, this sociological analysis of preelection polls neglects the broader context of mainstream culture. In this context of abundance and acceleration, opinion polls are a form of political information transmission "that can be easily encoded for survival in the meta-medium of an informational milieu" (Terranova 2004a: 25). Polls not only have exchange value as information commodities, but they are also implicated in the production of political reality. By rethinking the relation between information and communication, and emphasizing informational dynamics over signification, polls may be understood as a political technology "crucially concerned with the organization of the field of the probable or the likely" (ibid.).

Recent Canadian federal elections provide an opportunity to develop these arguments further. During the thirty-six-day 2004 election campaign, there was the routine mobilization of pollsters and opinion survey workers in tandem with reporters and commentators to interpret them, and a mobilization of political leaders and aides in tandem with political reporters and photographers. There was an abundance of voter-preference polls, as well as some new developments in polling technology. Political scientists and pollsters

experimented with computerized seat projections in the 1990s and the media began to publish them in the 2000 election. In 2004, seat projections commissioned by two major multimedia corporations – BellGlobe Media (which owns CTV and *The Globe and Mail*) and the CanWest Global Communications Corporation (which owns Global Television and *The National Post*) – became a regular part of their television newscasts, newspaper reports, and websites. *The Globe and Mail*, Canada's oldest, editorially conservative, national newspaper, published the results of Internet polls as well as probability-sample telephone-based surveys. Global Television, a private national television network, in partnership with the *National Post*, conducted "wireless public opinion research." The traditional *vox populi* interview in the streets was supplemented by "Vox Poll," promoted as the "next frontier of digital democracy."[1] In addition, focus groups equipped with "people meters" were brought into the Global Television studio during the televised leaders' debate. The aim was to make the solicitation and collation of responses and the reporting of results converge in "real time." In these ways, the daily reporting of poll results is supplemented by up-to-the-second public opinion, accelerating the flow of information within the circuit between the television screen, the newspaper headline and story, the Internet, mobile-phone users, and the ballot box.

These developments in polling technology suggest that the opinion poll as a cultural form is being transfigured in its circulation. These faster polls, which have an aura of digital authenticity, make a complete break with social science methodology. Whereas one could never be sure how poll results would translate into actual seats, seat projections simulate the outcome of the election in advance. E-mail and wireless text messaging are instruments of nonrepresentative instant opinion and "gut reaction." Combining technological fetishism with speed, these instant polls enable journalists to intervene in the political process in the name of technological progress. Technological fetishism masks the poll-driven news media's political effectivity in the campaign; instead of playing back public opinion to politicians, they articulate what the public is supposed to think and feel based on the latest poll results. The use of old political marketing techniques and new technologies enables these news organizations to take on the voice of the "public," which is reduced to a self-selected sample of their readers and viewers who have access to the Internet or a mobile phone. By retrieving an obsolete older form, vox pop on the streets, in a new medium, Internet-based polling technology appears to resolve the crisis of democracy by allowing people to make their opinion known directly. For Global Television, the added informational value of "real-time" polling is that journalists' interpretations of television debates will not influence viewers' responses. But it is not higher expectations for deliberative, participatory democracy so much as plebiscitarianism – an ideology of representative democracy promoted by Canada's new right political parties – that has given

impetus to this development (Laycock 2002). This ‘real-time’ public opinion polling generates neoliberal technopopulism, a version of right-wing populism which reframes the central antagonism between the “elite” and the people: journalists rather than corporate owners are the “elite” that use polls to interpret politicians (especially right-wing ones) or debates in a distorted way that does harm to the presumably conservative body politic.

We must not forget that the media contributing to the higher-velocity universe of political communication have their own histories with respect to reading and viewing publics. Newspapers have been considered the ideal-typical form for the reader/citizen of a democratic public sphere. Political scientists continue to rehash the debate over the media malaise thesis (Nadeau and Glasson 2005), but Bourdieu argues convincingly that television news has had adverse effects upon democratic debates and practices (Bourdieu 1998). What is missing from Bourdieu’s sociological gaze is the contribution of new information and communications technologies to the mix and flow – retrieval, repetition, and forwarding – of political information. The publication of polls is no longer limited to newspapers and television, and polling methodologies are not limited to the stationary telephone. As Terranova points out: “It is not so much a question of technology as of techniques and modes of knowledge that all converge – through a variety of media and channels – in the terrain of the informational cultures” (2004b: 59). One of her most intriguing notions is that the networked, real-time structure of moving information has real physical effects – such as exclusion, disconnection, and withdrawal – apart from any message. My approach to accelerated public opinion follows her discussion of the informational dynamics of network culture, where communication “ceases to be representational and becomes tactical and strategic” (Terranova 2004a: 138). In the case of Canadian elections, the hypermanagement of accelerated political opinion coupled with unexpected political noise characterizes the scene of political communication.

THE 2004 CANADIAN ELECTION

Before this election, the Liberal Party held a majority government for ten years. Prime Minister Chrétien retired in December 2003 and his fiscally conservative finance minister, Paul Martin, became prime minister. In February 2004, the Auditor-General’s report revealed that millions of dollars for a federal unity program were funneled to advertising agencies that had contributed money to the Liberal Party. This abuse of public funds became known as “the sponsorship scandal.” Meanwhile, the right wing had finally succeeded in uniting the new Alliance Party with the older Progressive Conservative Party, and in March 2004 they chose Steven Harper as their leader. Despite polls showing that the Liberals were declining in popularity, the party opted for a late spring rather than fall election. Just before the election writ was dropped on May 24, *The Globe and*

Mail published a front-page report headlined “Poll Finds Voters Jaded and Volatile” (Fagan 2004, May 21). In this precampaign survey of 2,000 Canadians, 61 percent believed the governing Liberal Party was corrupt, 36 percent said the Liberals deserve to be reelected, 77 percent said they were “absolutely certain” or “very likely” to vote, and 60 percent preferred a minority government. Another CBC/Radio Canada preelection campaign “Democracy Poll” assessed voters’ sense of dis/satisfaction, degree of trust/confidence in politicians, and levels of political knowledge.[2] Such benchmark surveys attempt to map the electorate before the campaign begins.

On June 28, 60.5 percent of voters went to the polling stations and elected a Liberal minority government – the lowest turnout in Canadian history. By one estimate, 25,000 Canadians had been polled, and according to Elections Canada, $2,430,910 was spent by five parties on “election surveys or other surveys and research.”

Going into the final weekend of the campaign, *The Globe and Mail* published a poll of 2,000 people with a margin of error of 2.2 percentage points upward or downward. The statistical dead heat, interpreted as “a situation likely to produce a deeply fractured Parliament and the most unstable government” (Fagan 2004, June 25), completely ignored their own preelection survey in which people said they preferred a minority government. Their latest seat projection had the Conservatives winning 117 seats, the Liberals 101. Ipsos-Reid president Darrell Bricker, called upon to interpret the results of his own polls, abandoned statistical reason and forecasted that the Conservatives had the best chance of winning the most seats of any party. After the election results failed to confirm the predictions of the pollsters, the CBC – which had decided not to commission any voter-preference polls – presented some routine criticism of polling. Their “backstory” represents the possibilities and limits of media critique from within. Polls were criticized as the “narcotic of choice for political reporters” and “disruptive to campaigns,” but this was balanced with a call for more technical information and improved methods. Pollsters defended the accuracy of polling and argued that the “real folly” was in seat projections based on aggregated poll data.

The “day of reckoning” for the polling industry came and went. By the end of 2004, professional marketers published reports on methodological issues and discrepancies between final polls and election results, but concluded that the positives outweigh the negatives. As Champagne (1997) notes in his study of the 1995 presidential election in France, criticism of what went wrong with polls at the end of the campaign detracts attention from what was wrong with the polls carried out at the beginning and in the middle of the campaign. From the perspective of survey methodology, the latest polls are the least questionable because they may “record a true political situation” (Champagne 1997: 9). He speculates that “the unexpected reversal of the first and second place was

due precisely to the accuracy of the pre-election opinion polls and the effects that their publication managed to produce in the electorate" (1997:10–11). In the 2004 Canadian election, most pollsters forecasted a Conservative minority government. If the polls were reasonably accurate, and some undecided voters were informed by polls published during the last week of the campaign, this could account for the vote transfer that took place during the final weekend. Any polls conducted on June 26 or 27 which might have tracked a voter shift could not be published on June 28 because the 2000 Canada Elections Act bans the publication of opinion survey and poll results on election day. Political reporters and commentators constantly speculated on close polls and "strategic voting," especially in Ontario, the province with the most seats to be won. While the outcome was a voter shift big enough to contradict the last forecasted outcome, the ebb and flow of voting decisions is more complicated.[3]

The impact of published preelection polls on the mediated political process does not end with the question of effects upon voters' decision making. It has been argued that when so much media attention is given to horse-race polls, they take precedence over other, useful information, shrink the public space of debate, and compress the time for deliberation upon issues. In this Habermasian formulation of the relationship between the public sphere and democracy, poll-driven political journalism inhibits the formation of a rational voting subject. Preelection polls weigh heavily upon the conduct of politics and are integral to the practice of politicians because they "allow one to know too well what has to be said to the electorate to fool it (at least in the short term) and to tell it what it wants to hear" (Champagne 2004: 73). From this perspective, rather than opening any doors to criticism of political candidates, accurate polls make it possible to manipulate what the public thinks. "Far from helping democracy progress towards the ideal it claims to incarnate, polls have become the instrument of political cynicism *par excellence*" (ibid.).

However, as Gaonkar and Povinelli (2003) remind us, the rational subject of the public sphere emerged out of a particular matrix of circulating cultural forms. Contra Habermas, Dean argues that the capitalist, networked, technocultural environment produces a "suspicious subject" (Dean 2002: 48, 57). According to her, "publicity and secrecy provide the matrix through which we think about democracy and within which technoculture is materialized" (ibid.: 4). Publicity about secret government misuse of public funds helped produce a "we" of suspicious subjects before the election. When the election was called, the increased amount of political information served to depoliticize rather than empower. "The speed of networked communication," Dean writes, "gives many of us the sense of being forever behind, of forever lacking what everyone else has. The promise of information gives us the sense of being always

uninformed, unsure, never quite certain . . .” (ibid.: 148). By the end of this election campaign, what was truly remarkable was the large number of vox pops that portrayed citizens as confused. During an election, polls publicize the secret of how everyone will vote but people remain suspicious of these comparative popularity ratings. To return to Dean’s argument, there is no requirement to believe in polls; all that is required is that the belief in the “public” they represent is materialized in the technology and the political institution.

Moreover, as Terranova observes, the “entire field of culture and media has become the object of a diversified array of knowledge, tactics, and strategies corresponding to a hypermanagement of public opinion and cultural trends” (2004b: 55). Reportage, events, politicians and celebrities, policies and brands are promoted and rated all the time. The boundaries between politics and entertainment, political scandals and corporate scandals, voting decisions and purchasing decisions have collapsed while media audiences/computer users are hyperfragmented. Pollsters become the “experts” on who is winning or losing, prompting endless commentary or speculation on the campaign strategies directed at voters. In this media space there are only voters and customers to be won or lost. But “if public spaces are dwarfed by a constant barrage of non-democratic, non-participatory messages that do not allow for interchange and debate, then it is unlikely that democratic deliberation can really be effective” (Angus 2001: 26). If “narrowcasting” began to dissolve the common political culture of “broadcasting,” “egocasting” enables networked individuals to use digital media to selectively filter in/out information according to their own tastes and beliefs and to live in separate data/opinion sphericules (Pearce 2006).

According to Blais, Gidengil, and Nevitte (2004), recent generations are less prone to vote because they pay less attention to politics, and they are less likely to adhere to the norm of voting as a civic duty. An age-cohort analysis of survey data by Pammett and LeDuc (2003) showed that the “life-cycle effect” began to weaken with the cohort that entered the electorate during the 1980s – the Mulroney-led Progressive Conservative years. Successive cohorts participated less and less during the subsequent Chrétien-led Liberal years: “the voting rate slips to well below half, with the cohort entering the electorate in 1993 voting at 38.2 percent, the 1997 cohort at 27.5 percent, and those eligible to vote for the first time in 2000 voting at only a 22.4 percent rate” (Pammett and LeDuc 2003: 1). This generational decline coincides with the “growing perception of the meaninglessness of electoral participation” (Pammett and LeDuc 2003: 73). The study, sponsored by Elections Canada, sees hope for strengthening democracy in further educational and administrative efforts, but their report is silent on how politics has become mediatized and transfigured since the 1980s. Young people pay more attention to music television and downloading software

than politics, and more "voted" for *Canadian Idol* – an amateur popular music talent show hosted by Mulroney's son – than at the polling station. But Canadian political scientists continue to focus on age and education, or lack of political opposition or competition, as sources of turnout decline rather than broader cultural changes which define "politics" and shape perceptions of electoral democracy.

If "contemporary politics has become competition over specific gains, not ideological principles" (Dalton 2004: 206), neoliberal-oriented, corporate media have a special interest in defining political struggle in these post-ideological terms. A major consequence of profit-oriented, poll-driven news is that the public is inundated with political information but remains uninformed, uncertain, and never quite sure of the differences in platform, policies, or ideas among the contenders for political power. The mode of suspicious subjectivization is amplified by news of the misappropriation of public funds. With sponsorship scandal at the top of the news media's agenda for many months before the election, neither the public's response to polls nor the "spinning" of results can be separated from the consequences of political scandal (Thompson 2000). The mediated political scandal undoubtedly shaped the affective responses to the preelection polls, especially toward the Liberal Party, but in this technocultural context, *any* public interest vision of politics that politicians might express is subsumed by a cynical vision of all electoral politics and all politicians.

Pollsters cannot escape the matrix of publicity and its secrets and the disorganized complexity of accelerated media culture. They publicize polls as scientific mirrors because there is an expanding market for this information in a brand-conscious consumer culture and knowledge-based economy. The polling industry's credibility is based on keeping economic, technological, and methodological secrets from the public. Although they contribute a trivial fraction of industry revenues, media-funded voter-preference polls have brand-recognition value for polling companies. At the same time, between 2000 and 2004, the average sample size dropped by one-third, while the average margin of error grew by one-quarter.[4] Telephone-based polling methods encounter difficulties with wireless-only respondents, call display, and answering machines. With a refusal rate of about 80 percent, pollsters end up interviewing people who are not representative of eligible voters (Barrett 2004).[5] Polling is not above the technocultural fray, but embedded in it. When these secrets are part of the flow of information made possible by the Internet, the activity of pollsters is bound to be viewed as the production of phony public opinion. Former Progressive Conservative Party pollster and current political pundit Allan Greg recently retold the story of failing democracy and came to the realization that "Polling, my chosen profession, now strikes me as a primary cause of the decline" (2005: 38). He argues, echoing Bernays (1945), that polls have become the agenda, "depolicied" politics, and made leaders too

poll-conscious. In this version of trivialization theory, the production and consumption of poll-driven political news is yet another way of amusing our democratic selves to death.

THE INTERPLAY OF POLITICAL RECOGNITION, INFORMATIONAL DYNAMICS, AND PUBLIC AFFECT

Political opinion polling is a technology shaped by professional pollsters that caters to the interests and concerns of their favorite clients: journalists and politicians. While this cultural form circulates, it makes it appear as if the "people" are united or divided in synchronicity with either the Liberals or the Conservatives, or sometimes the NDP, except in Quebec, where it became a contest between the Liberals and the Bloc Québécois. I turn now to a discussion of how this political technology is articulated with journalistic practices on the one hand and political campaign strategies and tactics on the other. In this section I show not only how political popularity is managed through stories, opinions, and leaks, but also how things happened during the 2004 election.

Polling technology is not autonomous and has no single role or effect. First, polls produce effects directly by "occupying the space for political commentary" or indirectly "by changing the 'media coverage' of political campaigns," in order to produce "a certain presentation and portrayal of political struggle" (Champagne 1997: 13). Second, as Brookes, Lewis, and Wahl-Jorgensen (2004) point out in their study of the 2001 British general election, horse-race polls are used by journalists "to structure the narrative of the campaign" (ibid.). In close elections, they "tell us who is ahead, who is behind, and allow endless speculation about what candidates need to do to win elections" (Lewis, Inthorn, Wahl-Jorgensen 2005: 53). Third, within the journalistic field, "A *published* pre-election poll can no longer be a forecast: it becomes information which intervenes in the electoral process" (Champagne 1997:10; italics in original). As an index of public opinion, for example, polls make political parties and their leaders newsworthy, and therefore recognizable and reasonable to vote for. *The Globe and Mail* and the Green Party provide an example of what is at stake in the numbers. It was not until one poll showed that the Green Party had 6 percent popular support that the editor in chief of *The Globe and Mail* made a decision to publish their platform on the newspaper's website (Greenspon 2004). Following changes in campaign-financing law, each vote secures public funding for any small party that receives 5 percent of the popular vote. This change coupled with an Ipsos-Reid poll made it possible for the Green Party, which has never won a seat, to be differentiated from the Christian Heritage and Communist parties and to be recognized as a new party that was "coming of age." The poll-based proof of political support and rationalization for increased coverage masks the fact that the Green Party had adopted fiscally conservative economic policies to make it more appealing to right-wing voters.

Poll-based political recognition of the new Conservative Party was even more evident when *The Globe and Mail* revised a newspaper headline after the English-language television debates in response to an instant Internet poll. The headline that first went to press was "Leaders Split Deeply on Rights as Campaign Endgame Begins." Thirty-seven percent of respondents thought Steven Harper had won the debate. Since Harper was the "guy with the numbers," the headline was rewritten to read: "Martin puts Focus on Charter but Can't Slow Harper Surge." As the editor in chief summed up, writing the headline for the debate story came down to a choice between the opinion of six pundits or 2,107 respondents. Here the instant Internet poll functions to set up connectivity among the television debate, an editorially conservative newspaper, and an Internet-enabled nonscientific sample of television viewers. *The Globe and Mail* is feeding back public opinion to politicians more quickly and feeding forward information about Harper's more successful performance to its readers. The Internet poll result is used to validate the claim of a surge in public support for the Conservatives.

However, mediated political campaign communication is open to noise, so political outcomes remain open to contingencies, and thus subject to information strategy and tactics. There is always the "potential of the event as it erupts within the closed circuit of communication" (Terranova 2004b: 70). From this perspective, information is not simply mediated by cultural codes; rather it implies the "unfolding of a duration – an active temporality where consequences hardly ever flow linearly from causes" (ibid.: 69). Canadian politicians get elected not just because of what they say, or how they say it, but *when* they say it. To support this contention it is necessary to specify more clearly the time factors and informational dynamics of this election.

For the duration of an election campaign, reporters and photographers are embedded with the political leaders' tour of the country. At the outset of this campaign one reporter described it as a media "Olympics" – a "marathon" that is "run at a sprinter's pace." The rapid mobilization of bodies and technologies aims to clear a channel of communication to the public by appearing in as many major media markets as possible. The political campaign process, orchestrated and choreographed for maximum media exposure, takes place within the time frame of party schedules and media deadlines. Polling is central to the conduct of a campaign, whether building the image of a leader, informing the decision to attack or counterattack, or writing a script for a political speech or ad. The rise of computer-assisted telephone technology in the late 1980s made possible the "rolling poll" whose overnight results could be taken into account the next day. Political reporters assigned to cover the election have good reason to worry about whether they have been "captured" by their news sources and reduced to transcription corps. We recognize this as the tyranny of "media time"

over "political time"; at the very moment when you would expect public opinion to be open and fluid, political communication "that transpires in the media's time-horizon tends to instead pin down and harden inchoate opinions and moods into immutable prejudices" (Meyer 2002: 104).

However, in the accelerated politics of this election, polls indicated volatility of opinion and a fluctuating affective sphere. From each political party's standpoint, the aim of its cross-country tour is to produce the same message and the same image of its leader everywhere. Political reporters are issued the same news releases. They travel together, go to the same press conferences, and share leaders' answers to reporters' questions. There is collusion not only at the interpersonal level but also at the level of the television network. Five major networks formed a video-camera pool where one camera crew was assigned to each leader's tour. It cost nearly $30,000 for each reporter to have a seat on the leader's bus, and it cost another quarter of a million dollars per network to use the footage. All networks outside this video pool were excluded from using this footage. The result was a monoform style of political news where every national television viewer gets to see the same staged events and compressed question-and-answer time from the same angle and framing.

But as Luhmann writes about the serial production of news: "Surprises and standardization increase in intensity in relation to each other to generate informational values which otherwise would not occur, or at least not in a form capable of dissemination" (2000: 28). The more candidates stay "on message," the more repetition and redundancy set in and the less election campaign news there is. Meanwhile, campaign "war rooms," functioning as newsrooms, monitor the opponent's campaigns with the hope of disrupting his or her "message of the day." In this milieu, every transmission, as Debray puts it, is a "combat, against noise, against inertia, against the other transmitters" (Debray 1996: 45). Trapped inside a "communication bubble," photographers look for "color" in the "message of the day" and reporters hope for some piece of information that does not simply flow between political senders and their public receivers. Unplanned events that erupt within or outside the closed circuit of campaign communication can therefore make a difference between the routine coverage of staged campaign events and a "good story." And if fax machines set the pace of campaigns in the 1990s, handheld e-mail/cell-phone/text-messaging devices have accelerated the flow of information between campaign managers and candidates, and between party leaders and the reporters, assignment editors, and television pundits who follow them. The ideal turnaround time between reception of a political claim and rebuttal is believed to be about thirty minutes. In this situation of urgency and competition, information can fly like a "transductive arrow" (Terranova 2004b: 69). The timing of certain pieces of information, released to control

the unstable milieu, can have nonlinear effects, induce feelings, and actualize a different direction.

In the last ten days of this election campaign, two moments illustrate nonlinear effects upon public opinion and emotion. In response to a June 18 major news story in which a child rapist-killer confessed that his desire was fueled by pornography downloaded from the Internet, the Conservative “war room” issued a news release with the headline “Paul Martin Supports Child Pornography.” This release was transmitted by e-mail to reporters who then questioned the Conservative Party’s director of communication and, the next day, leader Steven Harper. From the perspective of the party press secretary, this was only a matter of a headline not being as refined as it should be. Rather than apologize for the headline, Harper tried to clear the channel to the electorate by amplifying his attack on Martin’s record, which made it a two-day story. Suddenly, the closed world of self-reinforcing campaign information was interrupted by information about information. For reporters, the issue became how Harper’s campaign mishandled the release of information. Liberal strategists responded by trying to turn this issue into a three-day story. The result was that Harper’s campaign looked manipulative and he looked like a leader who had violated norms of political campaigning and good taste.

Harper’s popularity was undamaged but he curtailed his exposure to national media to avoid opening himself to any further controversy and his campaign to more noise. Although few Canadians knew who he was at the beginning of the election campaign, his campaign team attempted to construct his image as a “regular, everyday, family” guy. After the English-language television debate on June 15, Harper predicted a Conservative majority. Then, with seventy-two hours left to go, a transcript of remarks made during a preelection documentary interview by MP Randy White, former Conservative justice minister, was released. In the interview, White said Conservatives would use the notwithstanding clause to override the Charter of Rights and Freedoms on gay rights and the definition of marriage. Martin had made the defense of Charter rights part of his campaign message, but the release of this tape forced Harper to distance the party’s views from White’s “personal opinions.” This far-right “off-message” attack on the courts contradicted the image of a new-fashioned compassionate, moderate, tolerant Conservative Party. Harper’s reaction made big news; in one-on-one local television interviews he said White’s opinions were “unimportant,” that the release of this information was a Liberal “fear tactic,” and that his party includes those who believe the courts have contributed to the moral slide of the country by giving Canadians too many rights. The whole Conservative channel to the public was collapsing and their momentum began to decelerate. The Liberals kept their own internal tracking polls – which showed them picking up support as rapidly as Conservatives were losing it – a secret. This final phase

of the Liberal campaign strategy against the Conservatives shifted to address potential NDP voters, who were poised to give the NDP the balance of power in a Liberal minority government.

From this rough description, we can conclude that poll results grab attention, but the leader-driven, image-based political campaigns coupled with routinized campaign reporting can reach a threshold of newsworthiness. When pollsters have defined the campaign as a two-way race that is close or tied and the public perceives party platforms as similar, when you say something may take on more importance than what you say. The Conservative strategy had been to articulate their attack to moral criticism of the Liberal Party for its role in the sponsorship scandal in order to whip up the electorate's disdain and outrage. By the end of the campaign, this theme was no longer new and the Gomery Commission's findings about the Chrétien government's abuse of laws lost traction. What was new, and became the news, were Harper's reactions to the excesses and inconsistencies of his own campaign message. This news seems to have generated feelings of common concern. What was induced by the mix of polls indicating support or momentum and news about strategic (in)competence was a localized shift in outcome. On election day, the voters elected a Liberal, rather than Conservative, minority government.

It would not be surprising if I were to conclude by saying that social-pragmatic neoliberalism won the election over ultra-neoliberalism, or that neoliberal hegemony worked just well enough to contain voter cynicism. On the institutional level, nothing more was rearranged than the political deck chairs on the sinking ship of representative democracy. Nonetheless, there is more happening here than meets the cynical eye. A survey of 4,300 respondents conducted by political scientists suggests that "something happened in the last days of the campaign to diminish the impact of voter anger" and there was a "last-minute surge in Liberal support on the part of those who were only somewhat angry" (Gidengil *et al*. 2004). These political scientists are unable to account for the impact of the media because they focus only on the content of English televised debates or Liberal attack ads. Political science fails to see that a political culture is a technological culture, and, therefore, they continue to "isolate politics from technics" (Debray 2000: 22).

Let us look at this change in momentum more closely. Another, later postelection survey asked 968 voters how they voted in 2000 and 2004. The results suggest 14 percent changed their minds in the last week of the campaign. The Liberal Party picked up support from late shifters: 56 percent agreed with the statement "At the end of the day, I thought it was the safest thing to do" (Graves 2004: 7). Twenty-four percent said it was the leader's performance during the final days of the campaign. Only 16 percent said it was media coverage of the parties' positions and political advertisements. These results suggest that the impulse to punish or censure the Liberal Party for

the ongoing scandal gave way to a desire for safety. This assumes psychological motives are more determining than the media. What is more, the survey's designers have distinguished emotional, performative, and informational "reasons" when the affective sphere and informational culture cannot be so distinguished.

Changes in direction depend on impressions and feelings that can only be indicated, but not accounted for, by pollster's "momentum questions" or postelection surveys of "shifters." How can we grasp the relationship between political "reality" and the pool of potential public feeling? Massumi (2002) provides us with another angle on the results. If public affect is a nonpsychological state of intensity that fills the gap between a political image and its effects on the public, then the language and images of electoral politics do not just report what happens but they resonate with voters' affective states, memories, maps of what matters, and their action–reaction circuits. Within the accelerated serial mix of opinion, stories, commentary, and events of the final week, the Harper image lost its grip on the "prime minister" feel because he was personally *too* conservative, and the relation between the possible and the real, the likely and the probable, was recalibrated. In the space-time of the campaign, the fast flow of information about political support and momentum was articulated with the politicization of affect to shape the eventual distribution of ballots. The Martin image may not have been *too* compelling, but the Harper image was *too* threatening.

THE 2006 CANADIAN ELECTION

Prime Minister Martin ordered a government inquiry into the sponsorship scandal, and the political fall out of the televised hearings and Justice John Gomery's phase-one report on who was responsible would dominate the political news in 2005. In the late fall, the Liberal minority government fell in a nonconfidence vote and in the new year the Conservative Party would switch positions with the Liberal Party. Media coverage of the fifty-five-day campaign was still centered on Martin v. Harper but somewhat less dominated by polls and seat projections. In the beginning, the Liberals had a six-point lead over the Conservatives, but pollsters and political scientists point to two outside events that shifted momentum to the Tories: the December 26 shooting of seven people that left one 15-year-old girl dead on Toronto's Yonge Street, and the RCMP's (Royal Canadian Mounted Police) announcement of a criminal investigation into whether Finance Minister Ralph Goodale and his finance department had leaked information about the government's tax plans for income trusts. These two events were juxtaposed on the front page of the *Toronto Star* on December 29, 2005.

The gunfight that turned Boxing Day bargain hunting into holiday hell helped put law and order onto the political agenda. Martin had pledged to fight urban crime with a ban on handguns before the Boxing Day gun violence, but by January 6, after the images

of Boxing Day mayhem and agony, came headlines like "Harper Trumpets Get-tough Crime Plan." The second event was an RCMP investigation into a possible leak of information from the finance department about income trusts. The RCMP does not usually issue news releases about criminal investigations during elections because such information may influence voters. The RCMP claimed that the timing of the release was to "clear the air" in the wake of a one-month review prompted by the NDP. Finance Minister Goodale's refusal to resign became big news and gave the issue of ethics greater profile.

For this election, the Conservatives had more time to prepare, modify their campaign organization, and import strategy from Australia. Their campaign managed to avoid information accidents and displays of political communication incompetence. From the beginning, Harper made policy announcements first thing in the morning and made himself available for chats with the press for candid talk about heading a minority, rather than majority, government. At the same time, he kept his own socially conservative MPs out of the public eye. Late in the campaign, Harper told reporters that judges appointed by the Liberals were activists who promoted their own social agendas, but this was one of the few times he was considered by political journalists to have "deviated from the script" or "strayed from the center of the political highway." The final week of the 2006 campaign was a minor repeat of the last week of the 2004 election, as Harper's lead in the polls took a hit and Ontario voters began to have misgivings. But the Liberals hoped-for rebound and late vote shift did not happen.

In contrast to 2004, the Liberals' information strategy and tactics became an issue. Scott Reid, the Liberals' communication director, was forced to apologize on CBC TV for saying that parents would "blow" the extra dollars they would receive from the Conservatives proposed $1,200 child allowance on beer and popcorn. Like the Liberals who had tried to make news out of the Conservative "soft on child porn" news release, the Conservatives did all they could to keep this political aide's "beer and popcorn" remark in the news. Published polls showed the Liberals and Conservatives in a near dead heat three weeks before election day. But Harper's "policy-driven and gaffe-free" campaign had reduced anxiety about the party and his party gained "traction and momentum" going into the second phase of the campaign. With ten days left, the Strategic Counsel's seat projections for *The Globe and Mail* and CTV News put Harper on the cusp of a majority with 152 seats for the Conservatives, 74 for the Liberals, 60 for the Bloc, and 21 for the NDP. At this point, in an effort to narrow the eleven-point gap between the Conservatives and Liberals, one of the twelve Liberal attack ads, which was intended to raise concerns about Harper's far-right agenda by focusing on his agenda for increased military presence in cities, backfired by offending soldiers and veterans. Even though this ad was quickly

pulled from the Liberal website and never broadcast, it circulated on the Internet and was discussed in newspapers and weblogs. The Liberal's "negative" ad strategy and Martin's role in approving this particular ad became big news, their channel to the public began to collapse, and speculation about losing the election grew. Martin's late attempts to clear a channel to the public by warning that abortion rights were in danger could not surmount the noise created by all the opposition parties.

In the 2006 campaign, the Harper image "evolved"; he had become "more of a politician than he used to be" and he looked "moderate, temperate and prime-ministerial." With Harper's quick return to campaigning after a holiday break, he was able to grab the most online news attention on the issue of gun violence (Elmer, Devereaux, and Skinner 2006). Fear of urban violence, and anger over government corruption was articulated to a desire for change in government, especially in Quebec where the sponsorship scandal resonated deeply. In Ontario, the desire for a change in government became stronger than the desire for continuity. The Harper image was *more* cool and comfortable, while Martin's image was *too* uptight and righteous. In the second phase of the campaign, published polls showed the Conservatives taking the lead and then surging ahead. What was induced by this mix of stories, images of Harper's "moderate stance," polls measuring popularity, and Liberal information accidents was a change in the perception of the risk associated with switching from a Liberal to a Conservative minority government. At the same time, NDP voters felt less compelled to vote strategically for the Liberals in order to keep the Conservatives out.

Media poll-itics had modulated public affect in a more conservative direction in 2004 without a change in the governing party. In 2006, pollsters predicted a conservative minority and there was no late shift in predicted outcome. We could say ultra-neoliberalism presented itself as populist neoliberalism and won just enough consent, especially from older voters, men, and more affluent Canadians, to become the governing party.

Pollsters who are trying to measure a candidate's velocity say that the new equation for elections is this: mass (polling numbers) x velocity (how quickly numbers rise or fall) = victory (Chung 2006). In this political calculus, polling numbers may not produce knowledge but they do play a role in actualizing the outcome. The latest published polls are situated (dis)information events that transmute the conditions of political campaigns. The techno-informational dimension is the material condition for the circulation and transfiguration of polls, and the precondition for the emergence of perceptions of security and risk associated with voting. In the event of the election, the latest poll numbers shift from the denotative to the indexical, quantifying collective hopes or fears in the political future. At the same time, noise, information accidents, and outside events

produce turbulence in the flow of political campaign communication. If there was no indeterminacy in the electoral process, if everything that happened within the electoral system could be explained by structural factors, if the future really resembled the past – which is what polls presume – then we would no longer need to go to the polling booth on election day.

We may conclude that political marketing has replaced the public sphere, or that surrogate or counterfeit public opinion is being exchanged in a political market that limits citizen input and control. But in this kind of final analysis, there is not much difference between those who conclude that the scarcity of useful information trivializes public discourse, and those who conclude that the surfeit of information leads to the foreclosure of politics because it circulates without any response from the political system (Dean 2005). Embedded in the disorganized complexity of technoculture, the kinetics of media poll-itics resembles *Prime Minister Forever*, a strategy game that simulates aspects of federal elections. The game features real candidates and realistic polling. As the designers put it:

> Throughout the game, as in real life, outside events will occur that impact the election. Your response, as well as your candidate's attributes and position on the issues, will determine whether events help or hurt your campaign. (Karp 2006)

From a player's standpoint:

> Prime Minister Forever is amusing and challenging, but loses its novelty in time. There are a limited number of tasks players can choose from – even fewer for smaller parties – and turns can quickly become repetitive. Still, the game is never predictable. Sudden scandals appear to quickly shift your party's momentum. (CBC.ca 2006)

From a technocultural perspective, however, media poll-itics is more than just gaming; realistic polling is a political technology and a vector of power. Rewriting Bourdieu (1993), public opinion does exist as a technocultural form and circulates more rapidly than ever. The media's power to show you the numbers during election campaigns is the power to mobilize or demobilize individuals and groups. At the same time, mediated election campaign time unfolds in an intense and sometimes unplanned way that modulates public affect. The latest poll numbers do not merely reflect public opinion or the momentum of political candidate or party, they punctuate and intervene in the unfolding of election time. As a political technology, the functionality of polling is not merely to inform or persuade, but to induce allegiance before you go into the voting booth.

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NOTES

1. See http://www.voxpoll.com/index.html (accessed June 27, 2005).
2. See http://www.cbc.ca/canadavotes2004/thepolls/democracypoll.html (accessed June 27, 2005).
3. A Canada-wide election study by Gidengil *et al*. (2004) found that a large majority of voters who preferred the NDP went on to vote for them and only 10 percent voted Liberal or Conservative. Many who changed their vote did so because they preferred Martin or Harper to Layton rather than to prevent a Conservative victory. Moreover, the Canadian House of Commons has 308 seats, so a majority requires 155 seats. The Liberals won 135 seats and the NDP won 19 seats giving them a combined total of 154 – one seat short of a majority. Even if NDP candidate Olivia Chow had won the closely contested downtown Toronto riding of Trinity-Spadina, which she lost to the Liberal candidate Tony Ianno by only 805 votes, the Liberals would have had 134 seats and the NDP would have had 20 seats, which is still only 154 seats. To be in a position to put a Liberal coalition in a majority position, the NDP would have needed to take one seat away from the Conservatives or the Bloc.
4. For the 2000 election, thirty-seven polls had an average sample size of 1,942.38 and average margin of error of 2.45. For the 2004 election, thirty-one polls had an average sample size of 1,319.93 and an average margin of error of 3.07. This represents a 24.97 percent change.
5. To be more precise, the Professional Marketing Research Society's Response Rate Committee found that for one-time studies, the rate of refusals may be accelerating. In 1995, the refusal rate was 66 percent, in 1999 it was 68 percent, and in 2002 it was 78 percent. Their data also show that interviews have been getting longer, and the longer the interview, the higher the refusal rate. In 2002, the aggregate refusal rate for interviews of twenty minutes or more was 80 percent. See http://www.mria-arim.ca/committees/responsearticle01.asp (accessed June 29, 2005).

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