

▶▶ **THE TANSLEY LECTURE**

Down the Social Media Rabbit Hole

Presented by Chantal Hébert

National Affairs Columnist, The Toronto Star

April 15, 2015

Ramada Hotel

Regina, Saskatchewan

WWW.SCHOOLOFPUBLICPOLICY.SK.CA

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ISSN Print: 1915-643X

ISSN Online: 1915-6464

The Tansley Lecture Series is presented by the Johnson-Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy and is sponsored by the Canada Research Chair program.

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INTRODUCTION

With the advent of a wired world, what is the impact on the connection between the media, public policy makers and voters? Are we on the cusp of a golden information era or do we just talk a lot more and listen a lot less?

Thank you for having me here again. Those of you who were at the Minifie Lecture in 2012 [University of Regina School of Journalism, “Missing the Forest for the Trees: A look at the state of political coverage in the social media era”] will find that I’m not very far from where I was then. I stated then and I will restate now that when I talk about social media and the coverage of federal politics, I’m doing something very different from what I usually do. I am used to speaking in bullet points about federal politics and offer as definitive a perspective as I can.

This lecture is a work in progress because it involves what is happening to what I do for a living and how politicians and the media interact, which has been evolving. There are no definitive conclusions, so if you’re expecting a nicely wrapped “here is the state of where we are,” you’re going to be unhappy. I’m not a media expert, I don’t write about the media, I don’t have time to be fascinated by the state of the media. I leave that to editors. This is an open-ended, “here’s what I see.”

BACKGROUND

We will soon officially be in a federal election campaign. I say officially because in reality we have been in it for months already. That election will be competitive. The flow of information will be faster and heavier than at any other time in the past. The social media will have more presence in a federal campaign than at any other time in the past. That's easy enough to say as the only part of the media that is really expanding is the part that is part of the social media.

At the same time – we have at our disposal technical means that we could not even imagine when I started to cover election campaigns. In those days, leaders tours took place in relative silos. At the risk of dating myself, I'm going to try to give you—especially those of you who are students—a flavour of what it was like when I started to cover politics. It was another century, but it was still within the lifespan of some of us in this room.

One of the campaigns I covered in Ontario was the Frank Miller campaign. Frank Miller succeeded a premier called William Davis in the mid-80s. The Conservatives had been in power for a long time in Ontario at that point, and he was to carry the torch for the Conservatives. What happened to him is a sideshow to the story I am going to tell.

Mr. Miller was campaigning on the day the equality section of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms came into effect. He held a press conference in Kingston, Ontario to discuss the impact of the clause. The announcement didn't go well.

We all got back on the campaign bus. The two drivers of the media bus drove us into the countryside of eastern Ontario to a very nice place where they held a barbeque for us. That place not only had a great barbeque set up, but it also had no phones. For the better part of that day, we were driven around on backroads of eastern Ontario, never within reach of a phone and never able to file about what had happened in

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Kingston that morning until past our deadlines. That was what you could do when the internet did not exist.

When you went on a campaign tour—campaign plane, campaign bus—you were literally owned by the campaign you were covering. You would not have had a clue as to what was happening on the other campaigns.

I covered the John Turner campaign in 1984. Parties usually try to go across the country in the first week of a federal campaign, so at the end of the week we ended up in Vancouver. Vancouver being where it is, our deadlines would be long passed by the time Mr. Turner spoke and none of our desks were going to care much about what he said on that Friday night.

As we sat in the restaurant waiting for the death watch to begin, one of my colleagues from the CBC spotted a pay phone and figured he should at least call his desk to say that he had landed. He came back to the table to report that the Liberals had decided to try to get rid of John Turner. Some of his own organizers want him off the plane; they want to replace him as leader even as the campaign is already on. The CBC and Globe & Mail had both reported the story, but those of us who covered the Turner campaign would never have had a clue until the next morning if the CBC reporter hadn't called his head office. How would we have known? There was no way to reach us; we were sitting in a restaurant. And the Turner campaign had no way to react and get on the record, in Central Canada newspapers because of the time difference.

Today – access to the internet means that facts are readily available. If I need to check a fact, I don't need someone from a party to give me background information . It also means that I know what's going on in other campaigns literally the second it happens. From the moment the all-news networks appeared in 1990 to today, the better place to cover politics when things are evolving is in front of a television camera rather than any given venue.

When the Meech Lake Accord died in 1990, I was the lead Meech reporter for my paper. Jean Chretien's leadership convention was taking place in Calgary at the very same time. I spent the better part of the end of that week trying to figure out whether I should buy a plane ticket to Calgary or sit in my office in front of my TV, where I could see what was going on in Manitoba and what was going on in Newfoundland and what was going on in Ottawa, and incidentally what was going on with the leadership convention in Calgary. In the end, I stayed in front of my television set. That was going to be the shape of things to come.

Today, I can have a better take on the big picture of a campaign from a park bench than if I'm on the tour of a leader. Because of the social media, all campaign tours are interconnected. On an iPad, I have access to what comes out of all the tours and as well what is going on on-the-ground from any coffee shop in Canada.

One would think that would translate into less opportunities for spin to go out of control and a more informed debate.

That is not quite what we have achieved.

Let me walk you through what I would describe as the trip down the rabbit hole that Canada's chattering class, including the media, is on.

Some constants:

The Tenor of Conversation

An election campaign is political life on fast forward. There are no pause buttons unless one counts the debates. Most of what I will talk about are trends that are exacerbated in campaigns but exist in the normal day-to-day life of governments and legislatures.

In the pre-internet days – campaigns could control their message. The media gave them what today would pass for unfiltered coverage.

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Journalists who covered campaigns were, by and large, dependent on parties (and governments) for basic facts. We called it spin – they called it background information. There was no logistical way to fact-check quickly.

As the Frank Miller anecdote illustrated, a party or a government could pick a venue isolated enough to get its message out before its rivals jumped on it. Up to a point, a leader’s tour owned the press that covered it. If you were a columnist you had to be onboard to access the information on a real-time basis.

Today the window within which a piece of information is delivered, dissected, reacted too and eventually analyzed has been narrowed down to a couple of hours and I am being generous. Fact-checking is out of the hands of spin-doctors. A party’s rivals can not only be out with criticism of a policy within minutes. It can also get into the heads of the media that covers it through twitter, e-mails, etc.

In the reverse, those who will analyze the policy are often not on tour and sometimes better informed than the leader who has just announced it. To compound our challenge, there is no longer a common rendez-vous to consume news.

When I covered the Meech negotiations at the conference centre in Ottawa, around six or seven o’clock at night I would see someone from the Prime Minister’s Office (Mr. Mulroney’s office at the time), talking to the powers that be at “The National”. I knew they were briefing them so that the federal message of the day would be fairly prominent. Because “The National” was the main place people would tune in to find out what had happened that day, it would shape the coverage.

You can’t do that anymore. Not only are the people from “The National” not in physical proximity to the people who would want to do that, but people are not tuning in to one place to find out what is happening and you cannot try to massage the message through one media to all the others.

Let me list some consequences of the changed communications environment.

1 - The handling and delivery of information is increasingly into the hands of quick response teams on both sides of the divide. Their knowledge of a particular issue is less important than their understanding of the need for speedy responses.

In my early days in journalism, I covered the education beat in Ontario. Every year, I used to call a civil servant at the Ontario department of education to find out about French enrolment in high schools in the province. The French school system was just starting off, so every year we would talk and compare the numbers from the previous year—she had all those numbers, I had none. I never met her, but I did talk to her for a number of years in a row.

Today, I would never talk to someone like that. If I called her section of the department, no one would answer the phone. Instead, I would be sent to the media section of the ministry.

At that point, I would be loaded for bear because I would already have all the basic facts. The only reason I would be calling would be because I had some controversial information that I wanted a reaction to. The person who would answer me would not be the person who knows all about the enrolment in French language schools, it would be someone who is good at responding in a crisis to someone like me.

Think of it like this. In the old days, if you went to the emergency room at a hospital, you might have had a sore knee or you might be dying of a heart attack. A lot of cases were of the sore knee and I need a bandage variety, and they were handled quickly. Now, everyone who shows up in an emergency room is usually fairly sick. The same goes for media requests to governments. People who call are not calling with bandage requests, they are calling because they will cause a heart attack in the minister.

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The kind of people who respond to that are not knowledgeable about bandages; they are paid to administer whatever it takes to send you away without causing a heart attack. That is a very different conversation.

And then these days, the communication between media and government is often done through email and there is no human reflex that stops you from repeating, “All is well in the western world.” It doesn’t hurt to do that.

But when the exchange took place on the phone you couldn’t help yourself, you had to talk, so there would be a conversation, even if it veered off into, “So what did your kids do for a holiday?”, you would establish a human contact.

These days, you can ask a government about the targets for x, y, z, and the answer will be, “All is in hand.” You ask about the targets for a, b, c: “All is in hand.” That is the tenor of the conversation that technology has brought us to.

2 – So far most governments have found that the best way to deal with the new information reality is to retreat behind a wall of relative silence. They play defence rather than go on the offensive.

Down the Rabbit Hole

When it comes to dispensing information, there has always been some creative tension between the need for control and the need to communicate. But today the need to control has become the purpose of the communication at the expense of essential information-sharing. As governments have become more effective at sharing knowledge and information –with the help of tools that have never been more efficient– the new virtual tools have been used to consolidate silos rather than bring them down.

As a political journalist, I can't think of a time when open channels between the political class, the civil servants who dwell in public policy and the media that reports on them have been a rarer commodity.

The background knowledge -the fact-based evidence- that used to be disseminated on a routine basis to sustain policy decisions has increasingly come to be treated as for-your-eyes-only material.

As we speak today in this country, a new information age has flowered into a golden era for disinformation. Instead of an expanded dialogue, we have, at best, a series of parallel soliloquies and at worst thick cones of silence.

Allow me to bring another feature that the social media has exacerbated in the national conversation.

The media has always been at its most influential on public policy outcomes within the so-called political fishbowl.

Politicians and policy makers are much more likely to react (or over-react) to media reports that touch them directly and to take action than the public is to take its cue from the coverage to make up its mind for or against a given initiative.

When I have seen a newspaper story with me in it, it was the only story in the paper. It could have run next to the crossword puzzle, it was still the only story in the paper because I was in it. I understand the reflex that causes that. Policy makers usually focus on one item of concern to them; a normal reader glances at twenty or thirty stories. It doesn't help that in most legislatures, politicians are handed a compendia of news stories that relate to them; they don't have a clue whether it ran on page twenty-four or on page one.

And then there is Twitter - the murky section of the fishbowl.

It is the domain of a high number of bottom feeders.

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It is also an increasingly favored playground of special interest groups, factions within parties...and spin doctors.

And it is where the chattering class interacts today.

I have a test I apply when I think I am getting too concerned over Twitter. I look outside my house at the person who delivers my mail (soon not to be doing it), at the people working with kids at the child care centre, at people doing the gardening. The day I see them looking at Twitter while they do all these things, I will consider that Twitter is a mirror of reality. As far as I can tell, they are not spending their days wondering who's saying what on Twitter. But while voters are not, almost every inhabitant of the public policy fishbowl, media and mediated, is spending more and more time on Twitter and that will only increase.

It is dangerous for participants in the public policy conversation to confuse the reality on social media with reality itself. That starts with the mainstream media of which I am a part. I understand the fascination with the bright shiny object that is social media. To me, social media is a really useful tool for transmitting information to more people...but it is a pipe, not the content of the pipe. It is just one more means of having a conversation with readers, not some magic thing that is going to turn them into princes when they are pumpkins or vice versa.

At lunch, there was a discussion about the state of the polling industry and its uncertain track record when it comes to predicting political outcomes these days.

People were kind enough not to raise the same issue pertaining to political journalists. And yet our recent track record is far from exemplary.

We may had virtual eyes on everything through, but we were still blind to the resilience of the Quebec Liberals in 2012 until it stared us in the face on election night.

We mostly did not see either the Conservative majority or the NDP breakthrough in Quebec coming in 2011 until both were upon us.

Part of the reason is that the conversation on the social media was strikingly different from what was going on the ground.

I got a taste of the disconnect between the two when Liberal leader Michael Ignatieff showed up on the south shore of Montreal for a 2011 rally in a riding that the Liberals at that point owned.

The controversy of the day in the media and in the chatter on social media was the Conservative move to ban some people from attending their rallies. Michael Ignatieff talked at length about how terrible that was.

At some point towards the end, he threw in a line about how he would take care of the Champlain Bridge if he became Prime Minister, and then he left. The journalists who covered him also left, and the story that night was how Ignatieff used the Conservative approach to rallies to argue that they have no respect for democracy.

I wasn't on the tour. I was waiting for a lift back to Montreal, across the bridge. I killed time by talking with people who had been at the rally. I asked them why they were there. One older man said he was curious to see how Michael Ignatieff performed, so I asked what he thought. He said, "He was well-spoken, but I don't understand why he wouldn't talk about anything that is relevant to anything we care about."

Out of the mouths of soft-spoken voters comes truth. Those 400 people had not come out to hear about the Conservatives. They were curious to hear about a Liberal government and most of what they got was a rant about how bad Stephen Harper was.

In the end they were a prop for the conversation that was taking place that day between the politicians and the media rather than voters with which a given leader was tasked with interacting.

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In that same campaign Stephen Harper often bored journalists to death by repeating daily that Canada needed a strong, stable government. But if you were on the ground, as I happened to be, and you talked to people about the election, the answer you got from people on the street is that maybe we did need a strong, stable government.

It was a boring repetitive message...except that it was also working.

The problem in a changing communications environment is that we are using our new tools to isolate ourselves. We may have new tools, but the fundamentals have not changed. But rather than having made the big picture more accessible to those who deem to interpret it, they are being used as self absorbing and distorting mirrors of a false reality.

A FINAL WORD

In this country, we like to talk about a disengaged electorate and when we do, we rightly point to an ongoing decline in voting participation.

And yet, time and again voters have taken matters in their own hands and surprised pundits and strategist alike by doing so:

Let me list a few examples:

- The federal culture cuts and the 2008 campaign in Quebec;
- The prorogation and the long-form census backlash;
- The massive participation in the anti-HST petition in British Columbia;
- The election in Calgary and Toronto of dark horses from the left and the right (Naheed Nenshi starting at a measly 1%) four year ago; and,

- The Quebec orange wave; that province's student movement and the 2012 maple spring.

Those outcomes have come up in a variety of geographical settings and they are not a product of the general surge to the political right or the political left. But they all came from the ground up rather than from the top down.

What they have in common is that traditional political vehicles and the elites that usually command them are being dragged by a populist locomotive, when they are not being simply left behind or cast aside.

Rather than a disengaged electorate, what we currently have is a disconnected chattering class that has largely lost the thread of the national conversation.

We have so far all been part of the problem rather than the solution.

The risk is that an engaged public will turn into an enraged public.

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ISSN Print: 1915-643X
ISSN Online: 1915-6464