Despite the proliferation of mainstream political voices and issues in the media, the modern state has hungered for even more predictive ways to dominate how it communicates with its citizens. An extensive and growing communications apparatus both in political offices and in the permanent government that supports them feeds a political obsession to ensure lengthy if not permanent occupancy of the highest office in the state.

The chances are that the above description applies to a good many Western countries, if not many other states around the world. It is late democracies in the West, however, that make allegiance to democratic governance while engaging in struggles with—for the most part—privately owned media for the right to make meaning in ways that benefit and extend their political mandates. These late democracies engage in such struggles while expressing concern publicly over the democratic deficit that has characterized their society and that some (Putnam, 2000; Aucoin & Turnbull, 2003; Nadeau & Giasson, 2003) believe manifests itself in generally less engagement by citizens in political life and the troubling fall in voter turnout at election time. However, generally left out in any discussion on citizen engagement are the benefits to politicians of voter disenchantment: the capability to target the most receptive audiences for their research-led political messages, while courting strategies that discourage other citizens from the perceived need to vote at all (Bennett & Manheim, 2001). Moreover, technological developments have transformed the political playing field by extending election and other campaigns permanently and making political messages available endlessly. It could be claimed that there has never been another recorded era in which strategic political communication in its many guises reigns so supreme. One might say that it is a good time to be a politician or a business that supplies strategic communications advice to politicians.

This chapter examines the nature and evolution of strategic communication in politics as it has developed in Canada and discusses how recent political parties in government in Canada have used the communications and information apparatus of the state to construct positive perceptions and images of their policies and actions, and conflate the government (or state apparatus) with the political party in power with the goal of gaining public support. The chapter takes a critical communication approach to strategic communication through analysis that is holistic, contextual, historical, and that foregrounds relations of power and dominance. A critical approach can further understanding of how contemporary communication practices in politics both extend and challenge the concept of “strategic” as applied to the terrain of political communication. Insights explored using this approach and the case of Canada may shed light on developments in strategic communication in politics in
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other countries or serve as a warning to tread carefully when using strategic communication for political and hegemonic purposes.

Specifically, the chapter draws on the work of Jay G. Blumler (1990), who first identified a disturbing direction in political communication in the UK of what he called “the modern publicity process.” This process was a struggle for influence and control over political events and issues that was akin to “the irresistible force of a magnet,” capable of “altering messages, issues, terms of political combat” and, finally, “perspectives and choices of citizens themselves” (pp. 101, 113). Peter Golding (1992) situated this modern publicity process and its bureaucratic apparatus within what he called a “public relations state” that built up its own publicity activities in order to manage the media and fund information campaigns to promote its programs. It has become routine for political communication scholars to discuss the “public relations democracy” (Lilleker, 2006), “PR state” (Ward, 2007), “propaganda society” (Sussman, 2010), and, more obliquely, “symbolic government” (O’Shaughnessy, 2004). The latter concept will be discussed later in this chapter.

If we are concerned about the role of the citizen in the modern publicity state, as politicians themselves claim to be, the concept of the commodification of audiences also needs to be examined. As Vincent Mosco (2009) explained, communication is a commodity that is very different from other commodities because it “contains symbols and images whose meaning helps to shape consciousness” (p. 134). Furthermore, the audience—in political communication, citizens—is a commodity in which the dominated (citizens) agree to be dominated in “reciprocal relationships” with those who dominate, here, the state or its representatives (p. 137; Fuchs, 2010, p. 32). There is no tangible product to purchase, just persuasive communications messages from the state that can contradict the factual reality, but make the audience complicit in their successful execution. Currently, in state publicity, it is the depth and breadth of that reciprocity that is in question.

Moreover, the audience commodity can be considered as endless in its capacity to extend its reach beyond the primary commodity. Commodities, in fact, produce their own commodities in a process Mosco called “immanent commodification” (p. 141), and commodification itself “demands the use of measurement procedures to produce commodities and monitoring techniques to keep track of production, distribution, exchange and consumption” (p. 141). Marketing studies are included in Mosco’s examples of monitoring techniques; for this chapter’s purpose, public opinion research analysis would be another such example that can “grow out of the development of generalized monitoring and surveillance procedures” (p. 142).

The field of strategic political communication has undergone conceptual change in response to a more commodified society. Kirk Hallahan (2004, p. 6) identified six different specialties in strategic communication, including marketing and political communication. Along with others, I contend in this chapter that the boundaries between two of these distinct categories have already blurred. As this chapter will demonstrate, within a Canadian context (Paré & Berger, 2008), marketing communication and political communication are seen to have already joined to produce the hybrid of political marketing (Lees-Marshment, 2001) now used by Canada and the United Kingdom, both by the state (by the elected political party) and within the state (by communications officers within the public service). It is clear from this recent scholarship that a connection exists between the two specialties. In addition, it is important to keep in mind that, for this chapter’s analysis, the largely uncritical acceptance of a marketing–politics merger actually works to give it credence and veracity as the way forward in political communication literature, thus permanently linking the two fields as a natural and normal alliance in political communication. Instead, the appropriateness of a state as an organization that “presents and promotes itself through the intentional activities of its leaders, employees, and communication practitioners” needs to be interrogated (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Verçiç & Sriramesh, 2007, p. 7). Even if a case can be made for such use of communication, it need not be accepted as a natural and inevitable marriage. In fact, communication thus “relegated to an instrument merely used to reach managerial or marketing-based goals” (p. 25) can be considered
an unvoiced and presumably non-consensual process or occurrence that challenges, even defies, identification and analysis.

In addition, as noted in Hallahan et al., a critical perspective that situates communication practice rather than organizational function as part of a strategic process reveals the broader power and control that lie behind how such practices “transform both organizations and societies” (p. 14). These practices are not normally transparent or apparent without deliberative examination of hierarchical power. This is due to a presumption that neutral administrative power as traditionally imagined and applied remains in the inner workings of the state, when clearly such neutrality has been breached by recent communication-focused governments, as this chapter will lay out.

A key question to be probed is: how does the commodification of targeted audiences through strategic political communication co-habit with state accountability to all citizens, when such purposeful communication is by definition exclusionary?

Development of Government Communication

Strategic communication cannot be divorced from the conditions under which it developed. W. Lance Bennett and Jarol B. Manheim (2001, p. 279) examined the post-WW2 pluralism of late democracies, with its underlying ideal that “the views of citizens are effectively and equitably represented through competing organized interests.” Critiquing the view that a free flow of quality information in a society is sufficient to ensure equal governance, even if elite policy capture is at play, they suggested instead that “information is typically publicized to mobilize and demobilize segments of the public to serve narrow strategic objectives, often masking the identity or intent of the communicator in the process” (p. 280) at the expense of both information transparency and inclusiveness. Bennett & Manheim concluded that an emerging neo-pluralist order based on the decline of stable group affiliation, the introduction of technology as an enabler to identify multiple targeted publics, and the rise of strategies of groups that lobby government not for influencing policy in itself but for reaching target audiences through them, has worked against the transfer of knowledge to citizens, and has both mobilized and demobilized publics for their own strategic ends. Later analyses echoed Bennett and Manheim contending that these shifts were made possible because of the fewer constraints on and the increasing free flow of information enabled by technology and its deregulation (Skinner & Gasher, 2005; Kozolanka, Mazepa & Skinner, 2012). Moreover, suggested Bennett and Manheim, an examination of strategic political communication campaigns illustrates how such campaigns work in a largely rule-free and instrumental environment in which whatever works strategically becomes paramount (p. 285); this can be related to the consequences of the uncritical embrace of political marketing.

Specifically examining the Westminster model of governance in the Canadian political environment, the beginnings of communication can be traced within the state and the public service that supported it back to the post-WW2 years, in which a war propaganda bureau became a permanent part of the state bureaucracy (Rose, 2000). This early communication, which is not unique to Canada, was perfunctory and generally not criticized in a time when the state was expanding and when most of the news disseminated was considered good for a growing society. Thus, such communication was merely considered the benign output of the normal management of government.

The concept of being strategic in state communication does not emerge until the post-war consensus began to exhibit cracks in the 1970s and 1980s due to economic crises that Keynesianism did not seem able to resolve. These crises in late democracies, with their large state apparatus to support the social welfare policies of Keynesianism, provided opportunities for economic libertarianism in the form of neo-liberalism and socially regressive neo-conservatism to develop over time and coalesce as The New Right (Gutstein, 2009). A key element in the social shift from the post-war consensus, with its collective system-led responses to social and economic issues, towards the New Right was the
emergence of an ethos of individualism that manifested itself through one’s economic ability to choose for oneself from a marketplace of both goods and ideas. In addition, the New Right strategically used the specter of economic crisis in communicating its perception of the need for restraining what it considered to be a bloated and inefficient state apparatus (Kozolanka, 2007). As New Right thinking coalesced and found success in elections at different levels of government, the concept of “citizen” itself vis-à-vis its relation to the state narrowed into “consumers” and into the even smaller group of “users.” This represented a paradigm shift from the universality of the social welfare state to individualism and had an impact on how citizens themselves used their votes, shifting their allegiances to whichever party of the moment spoke to their personal needs and wants. Thus the eventual retrenchment of the state in late democracies such as the UK, the US, New Zealand, and Canada represented not only different economic goals, but also specifically New Right economic goals.

Mosco (2009) points specifically to the shift to the New Right as an example of how the state has been transformed through commodification processes that have turned its “public service communication with social commitments to universal access and content that reflects the broad range of society into commercial communication that provides access to those who can afford it and content that delivers audiences to advertisers” (pp. 130–131). Just as a renewed neo-liberalism/neo-conservatism itself was expressed politically in the New Right, a private-sector management ethos became the administrative model of choice for emerging New Right governments. As New Public Management (NPM) within a de-funded, de-layered, back-to-basics bureaucracy, governance itself was transformed to focus on services and measurement. Overall, it was an acceptance of a more market-based organizing structure and orientation for the state (Havemann, 1998; Savigny, 2008). Within the politics of retrenchment, however, the role of communication was renewed and strengthened (Davis, 2002). The emphasis was placed on strategic communication—a concept borrowed from the private sector—to manage the cutbacks and expectation of citizens, made possible by adding to communication budgets and taking on the functions normally found outside of the public sector, such as risk management and crisis management (Kozolanka, 2006). In fact, the idea of “crisis” was a profound two-pronged animus: it was both the underlying rationale for crisis management and also the communication message itself that ensured that a crisis was seen as the horrific end result of not taking action to protect the economy. In management in the public service in Canada and other countries, strategic communication was “not random or unintentional,” but a “constitutive activity of management” (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 27).

In practice, the inculcation of strategic communication into the state bureaucracy was based on the instrumental methods of political marketing to achieve its hegemonic goals. This included not only the use of practices from public relations, but also extensive public opinion research. The latter was already in use in government in order to fine tune information on government programs for the generally accepted purpose of finding out the opinions of the populace, but now it was used for identifying target audiences of citizens so that the government in power could adjust and tailor the right messages to the right sectors for maximum approval ratings and, eventually, votes. Thus, citizens were commodified as audiences for strategic political communication messages and campaigns to sell public policy.

This chapter now examines the emergence of strategic communication as a key element in political communication in Canada. It draws on examples from two political parties that used different and emerging political communication tactics—strategic communication and political marketing—during their time in office and assesses their varied success, attributing it to developments in socio-economic and political conditions as well as advances in political communication. It finds that political marketing can be considered the communication arm of the New Right ideology of management and governance. The chapter concludes that political marketing is an effective instrumental tool that can be useful for electoral success, but that is not suitable for use by governments, as it fosters a commercial relationship with consumer-voters, rather than accountability to citizens.
Government Communication in Canada

Canada has a parliamentary system based on the Westminster model in the UK. Although it is a multi-party system with various political parties represented in Parliament, in practice, only two major parties, the Liberals and the Conservatives, have formed governments in the last 100 years. Over time, the Liberals have often been seen as the party of government, as they have been in power far more than the Conservatives and are hegemonic in their approach to governing, and hence in their (to them) non-problematic use of promotional communications. Since 2006 however, a renewed Conservative Party has challenged them and, in addition, a major shift in the fortunes of two of the parties in the 2011 general election has changed the political environment in a major way, with the left-leaning New Democratic Party replacing the centrist Liberals as the official opposition. This shift dominated the other major change in that election: after two minority governments, the Conservatives won a majority mandate from the Canadian populace.

Just as with other late democracies, Canada has faced slipping voter turnout in federal elections. This is thought to be related to many factors (Norris, 2000), including distrust by citizens of governments that do not follow through on election promises, and governments that do not disclose information needed for citizenship, because such information might put the government in a bad light (Rubin & Kozolanka, 2013). This perception affects not only voter turnout, but also trust of and accountability in government, a key issue in recent Canadian political history. Due to its strong political and structural ties to the UK, as illustrated by its similar parliamentary system, political communication in the UK tends to foreshadow similar developments in Canada. The policies and communication strategies used by the neo-liberal Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher (1979–1990) and, later, Tony Blair’s Labour government (1997–2007)—many successful, some not—are often echoed in the Canadian political environment. British examples include the failure of the government’s poll tax campaign in Thatcher’s Britain (Deacon and Golding, 1994) and subsequent prime minister Blair’s successful media management while in office (Scammell, 2001). In addition, close proximity to the USA, with its presidential style of politics, also influences political behavior in Canada.

Other social and political conditions that have an impact on how governments and political parties in Canada and elsewhere communicate have changed over time as well. The 24-hour news cycle keeps the media hungry for content and also provides broader opportunities for politicians to publicize themselves and their policies. In addition, the Internet has given immediate access to information and opinions on everything, although not necessarily reliable information. These and other conditions have changed politics from a discrete election period, after which a government governs, into what political commentators call the permanent campaign (Bowman, 2000).

The politics of the New Right has also influenced policy making. In the post-war politics of consensus, labor and civil society groups were consulted and had influence on public policy. However, as politics shifted towards the New Right, civic groups were replaced by business, lobbyists for interest groups, and communications consultants (Dobbin, 1998; Gutstein, 2009). A further shift in the policy process was a legislative strategy that crunched public consultation into a shorter time-frame, often in tandem with curtailed scrutiny by the parliamentary opposition in all-party committees. For example, in 2012, the new majority Conservative government used a 457-page omnibus bill strategically as a budget bill to overwhelm opposition and push through many controversial changes to legislation at once. In prior times, omnibus bills were considered housekeeping that tied up small points in existing legislation. Used in broader contexts, these tactics challenge parliamentary and broader opposition on many fronts at once, effectively curtailing the right of citizens to communicate fully with their elected representatives.

Canada’s public service grew as the state grew throughout the last half of the twentieth century. In the 1990s, however, the country experienced severe cutbacks in response to global monetary
crises, which sparked the move to more streamlined and smaller government. As a result of this shift in the state, communication in government took on new importance as a strategic activity, and the “natural” and uncritical use of communication began to change. In a continued time of fiscal restraint, the size of communications staff and operations grew across government. Communication took on many new responsibilities, including, as mentioned earlier, risk management, which was intended to minimize uncertainty and neutralize opposition in a downsized bureaucracy. Basically, it was understood that strategic communication was needed to sell the unpopular cuts to citizens. To achieve the government’s goals, communication became embedded within the policy cycle in government operations, becoming progressively institutionalized, centralized and politicized (Kozolanka, 2012).

One important aspect of communication in government changed over time, and has also accelerated in recent years: this was the role of the Prime Minister’s Office (PMO), composed of political appointees and including both research and communication branches, and the role of the Privy Council Office (PCO), the administrative body of the permanent bureaucracy composed of bureaucrats that works closely with the PMO to implement policy. Not only have both offices increased in size, but their respective communication components, including budgets, have also increased significantly. From time to time, governments have made token cuts to these offices, but they remain the nucleus of policy direction—and communication—for the bureaucracy. Although its mandate is to work closely with the PMO, the PCO has been criticized in recent years for participating actively in partisan goals of the party in power, rather than just administering the government’s policies that are intended to boost the party’s in power’s approval ratings from the public, including direction of the communication of those policies, with additional funds for that purpose (Kozolanka, 2012).

The Liberals and Strategic Communication

At the time of state retrenchment in the 1990s, the Liberal Party was in power. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s in Canada, a political situation existed in which the country’s largest province, Quebec, was building public opinion to secede from the Canadian state. Throughout these years, Canadian politics was rife with debates on national unity. The Liberals had a huge personal stake in Quebec remaining in Canada: quite simply, Quebec was a vote-rich province for them. The response of the Liberals to the threat to their party and their continued dominance in federal electoral politics was to fan the flames of national unity and pour money into Quebec, with the help of strategic communications strategies and tactics.

This was the broad period in which communications in government increased dramatically and was formalized as “strategic communications” in its operations. As noted above, even during the time of state retrenchment in the mid-1990s, with thousands of public employees either laid off or their positions terminated, communication directorates in government rebounded quickly (Kozolanka, 2006). In 1998, the Liberals also took the unprecedented step of centralizing all communication within a new government department called “Communication Canada.” This would be akin to having a Secretary of Communication in the US or a Secretary of State for Communication in the UK (Canada already had an office for communication that was headed by a coordinator within the Privy Council Office). This meant that advertising, public opinion research, public information campaigns and other tools were contracted, approved and managed. Budgets for all these activities continued to rise sharply. In the same year, the Liberals established a Committee of Cabinet on Communications to oversee all government communications. The committee’s remit ranged from major advertising campaigns and large public opinion research budgets on issues of concern to the Liberals, to a fairs and exhibits program that promoted government across the country, and mass mailings (targeted at “householders”) to citizens across the country on issues deemed through research as issues on which Canadians wanted to see action. As a further sign of the strategic turn in communication, the 1988
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government policy on communications was revised in 2002 to include many more communications tools, including marketing, fairs and exhibits, risk management, crisis communications and sponsorships (Canada, 1988).

So untouchable was the hegemony of the majority Liberal government that its efforts to try to persuade Quebec to stay in Canada went beyond acceptable communication practices and tipped into illegality that benefitted the Liberal party itself. What became known as the “sponsorship scandal” ended the government’s obsession with national unity. Its lack of accountability for public money was also seen to be a cause of the eventual fall of the Liberal government in 2006. The purpose of the sponsorship program was to inform Canadians, heighten federal awareness, and build a strong and united Canada. What it more or less amounted to was the federal government paying advertising companies to have the country’s word-mark or the logo (a stylized Canadian flag and the word “Canada”) used at sporting events and other public activities across the country, and market Canada to Canadians in the same way that products get marketed.

Over several years, media reports began to note the huge costs of the program, then the Auditor General of Canada, an independent official with a mandate to examine public expenditure, investigated the program and produced two reports detailing its failures and overblown costs. This was followed by a public inquiry, which revealed that the scandal was caused partly by a lack of checks and balances in a streamlined bureaucracy, and partly by the control of communication that was centered within the Prime Minister’s Office itself. In addition, as it turned out, a disproportionate amount of this federal visibility was focused in Quebec. In all, the cost to Canadians was $145 million in inflated commissions and production costs to Liberal-friendly businesses in Quebec; and $100 million in kickbacks from advertising companies to the Quebec Liberal Party (Canada, 2005).

In the wake of the sponsorship scandal, most of the strategic communications apparatus that was built up in the bureaucracy was dismantled. The sponsorship scandal also provided an opportunity for the opposition Conservatives to use accountability and trust in government as a major plank in their election platform. In 2004, the Liberals lost their majority and then, in 2006, after a gap of 15 years, they were replaced by a Conservative minority government.

Important to note is that the scandal also hurt the reputation of those engaging in legitimate practices of information and communication in government. Overall, it was becoming more difficult to differentiate between public information necessary for citizenship and strategic communication that promoted the particular party in power.

**The Conservatives and Political Marketing**

As the transition of power from the Liberals to the Conservatives was taking place in Canada, developments in political communication theory and practice based on the UK experience were pointing to new ways that political parties were utilizing communications to promote themselves and their policies with the aim of gaining political office.

Jennifer Lees-Marshment (2001) conceptualized a “marriage” between political communication and political marketing that groups political parties into three types based on the communications strategies they employ. Lees-Marshment’s subsequent research demonstrated the success of those political parties that had embraced new forms of strategic communication that drew on political marketing (Lees-Marshment & Lilleker, 2005; Lees-Marshment, 2011). She suggested that parties can be product-oriented, sales-oriented, or market-oriented.

Parties that have a product orientation are traditional parties that simply stand for what they believe in. They have an ideology and ethos that is clearly visible in their policies and election strategies. They maintain their beliefs and believe that the best product will win. The implication in political marketing is that these parties are old-fashioned and risk losing electoral power by standing on principle. In the sales orientation, parties realize that to gain support for their policies or win elections
they must actively promote or sell their beliefs and create demand for their product; even a good product will not win without promotion. The third orientation for political parties is the market orientation, in which parties change their beliefs and behavior to match what the voters want, which they discover from marketing research. The party then delivers the policies or beliefs that people want, and creates a product that citizens respond to favorably—and vote for, which represents the “fulfillment” dream of advertisers. The implication is clear for political parties: if you want to gain power, you will take on a market orientation.

The idea of political marketing is deceptively simple. It speaks to the desire if not the need of politicians to achieve their ultimate goal of electoral success. The deterministic promise of political marketing is a powerful narcotic in the world of politics, yet it carries a high cost. First, it decouples ideology from politics. For electoral success, ideology is not needed; in fact, it can impede progress towards victory, as flexibility on the part of the party is an important element. For success, the party must go where the results of marketing take it. Second, political marketing privileges a consumer response to a product over a citizen response to a policy, thus commodifying the audience. Voters are encouraged to pick and choose as individuals which political product is best for them personally and not as citizens with the welfare of the community or the country at stake. Thus a link is created between political marketing and an ethos of individualism and consumerism. In effect, it can be seen as the public communication arm of New Public Management or, as it has now become fully implemented in government bureaucracies, New Public Governance (Osborne, 2010).

Some background is needed on organized conservatism in Canada. The shift away from the post-war consensus and towards the New Right manifested itself differently than in it did in the UK, New Zealand and Australia. Here it appeared first in provincial governments in British Columbia, Alberta and Ontario. In the industrial heartland of Ontario, the Conservatives came to power in 1995. Typically Ontario had elected Progressive Conservative governments for much of the post-war period. However, the Conservative government of Premier Mike Harris introduced the “common sense revolution”—the name of its party platform—with a stated goal of transforming the state-citizen relationship that was very unlike the former benign and middle-of-the-road “progressive” conservatism seen previously in the province. Using the tried and true “blitzkrieg” tactics formulated earlier in New Zealand (Easton, 1994)—also called a “communication offensive” in the UK context (Golding, 1992)—the new Conservative government packed in as much restructuring policy and legislation as quickly as possible, including a precedent-setting omnibus bill in its first six months in office. This ushered in two and a half years of relentless state restructuring and counter-response from civic society that at one point saw 250,000 people in Toronto demonstrate against the government (Macleod, 1999). Despite this, the Harris government stayed the course, even being re-elected for a second term. My own research demonstrates the importance of strategic communication to the Harris government, underpinned by extensive and finely targeted public opinion research that identified favorable sub-audiences and messaging for government communication with the public (Kozolanka, 2007).

However, the downside to the blitzkrieg approach to regime shifts was the extended and exhausting public struggle between the government and its opponents, from opposition politicians to social justice groups. By the time the federal Conservative party was re-building to replace the Liberals, the political strategy had changed. Like the Harris government in Ontario, the aim was to shift Canadians from their liberalism to a right-wing hegemony; however, the short-term blitzkrieg strategy was replaced by an under-the-radar incrementalism (Flanagan, 2007)—moving slowly towards their policy goals—supported by comprehensive strategic communication. This was for several reasons: the precarity of a minority government, which can be defeated at any time; the party’s realization that the Canadian public was generally liberal in political orientation and needed to be moved slowly to take New Right positions; and, importantly, the desire to avoid challenges from civil society that would take them off-track in achieving their ultimate goal of a conservative hegemony.
After the 2006 election, the federal Conservative march forward started with a decidedly controversial—and even counter-intuitive—media strategy. Instead of courting journalists in Ottawa, who mostly represented national or larger media, and winning them over to the Conservative way, the new government deliberately bypassed the parliamentary press gallery, preferring regional media outside parliament’s reach. When the Conservatives wanted or needed national media attention, they would select the reporters they felt would provide positive coverage. If they held a media conference, they would use a pre-arranged (and much shortened) list of journalists, in the U.S. presidential style. It was a high-stakes gamble, but the government knew that media owners would sooner play by the Conservatives’ rules and get the story than protest and be bypassed for interviews with cabinet ministers. The new government also instituted a cumbersome process for the media to use when attempting to interview cabinet ministers and subject specialists within the bureaucracy. The process was so lengthy that the need for comment or explanation was long past by the time approval from the Prime Minister’s Office was received (Blanchfield & Bronskill, 2010).

An interesting aspect of the Conservatives’ broader communication strategy is the diffused use they make of new media, blogging in particular, to disseminate their messages. Although blogging was once a communication tool rarely thought of as controllable or even well-informed, the government also stimulates and encourages carefully targeted citizen participation across the country through a large group of Blogging Tories, who network online to disseminate the party’s position under the radar from traditional politics in Ottawa. The Blogging Tories played a role in amplifying the Conservatives’ position in a political crisis that occurred when the two opposition parties in parliament attempted to form a coalition government soon after the 2008 election (Kozolanka, 2012).

The Conservatives have continued to conduct in-depth consumer-based research to target citizens. They have also delayed or denied public access to information requested by the media, the political opposition, or members of the public. Also, they have conflated the party with government in public communication, as “Canada’s New Government” when they were first elected and later as “The Harper Government.” This is in violation of rules that state that the appropriate and non-partisan title is “Government of Canada.”

As this strategy unfolded and included the 2008 general election, in which the party was returned as a minority government, the Conservatives continued to centralize power within the Prime Minister’s Office, especially power over communication, and in the government bureaucracy. Moreover, the role and nature of the PMO itself changed considerably under the new government. Not only did it increase in size, it added to its communication strength, although its policy component remained quite small in comparison, at one-fifth that of communication in 2007 (Kozolanka, 2012). As the PMO took on more communication strength, communication directorates in the bureaucracy were losing the strategic focus that had been built up under the Liberals, and the PMO returned to its previous role of merely implementing communication strategies. These included work undertaken by the Privy Council Office, which had inherited the administration of advertising and public opinion research after the sponsorship scandal (Kozolanka, 2012). Given the Conservative government’s extreme focus on self-promotion, in effect the PMO could be considered the executive office for its corporate communication (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 18).

Nowhere were their self-promotion efforts more evident than in the Economic Action Plan, the government’s response to the worldwide recession of 2008. Forced by the opposition parties to take measures to stimulate the economy, public communication about the plan also reinforced the Conservatives’ ongoing tactic of re-styling all public communication to make the connection to the party as government. This was clearly promotional, as well as partisan, rather than informational. In addition, costly saturation advertising to promote the plan, funded by taxpayers, continued well beyond the period in which the plan’s funds were dispersed and continued from January 2009 until the next federal election was called in April 2011 and then resumed after the election, which gave the Conservatives their majority, well after the plan’s funds were depleted. (In Canada, governing
parties cannot use public money for advertising and public opinion research during election periods, which have become ever shorter, and rarely exceed five weeks.)

The Conservatives also took over the logo of the Economic Action Plan, now firmly connected to the Conservative party, using it as the theme and backdrop for all government announcements. This made it very clear that the plan promoted the party, rather than the government program, and thus the advertising and the signs became part of the permanent election campaign. Importantly, the Conservatives directed the communication for the Economic Action Plan out of the Prime Minister’s Office, with its large numbers of communication experts, and with the Privy Council Office managing only the implementation of the plan (Canada. Privy Council Office, 2010).

Although the Conservatives at last gained a majority in the 2011 general election, they did so even as their popular vote rose only marginally, as the party successfully targeted and concentrated advertising, public opinion research, and their campaign events in a handful of ridings. Since the election, there have been allegations that the Conservatives may have gone beyond legal boundaries to convince citizens to vote for them, and that in a number of key constituencies they used voter suppression tactics that made a difference to the outcome of the election. It is alleged that the Conservatives used automated “robocalls” to misdirect non-supporters to the wrong voting stations on election day. At the time that this chapter was being written, these allegations were being investigated by Elections Canada (Milewski, 2012).

For better or worse, the Conservatives had become a market-based party, targeting voters based on precise public opinion research and selling voters’ own positions on issues back to them. In using the bureaucratic apparatus of government and the Privy Council Office as adjunct offices for support of its communication and information plans, the PMO had in effect been using PCO as its own version of Communication Canada, the short-lived, self-standing department formed by the previous Liberal government, and had firmly established New Public Governance in the bureaucracy (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 7; Osborne, 2010.

Conclusion

In their time in power, the hegemonic Liberals were adept at building a huge communication apparatus in government, concentrating power within the Prime Minister’s Office and politicizing communication efforts in the bureaucracy. The ensuing sponsorship scandal has been seen as the biggest scandal ever in Canadian politics, and the Liberals were voted out of office. The Conservatives also built communication capacity in government, enlarged the Prime Minister’s Office and controlled PCO and communication within it. Numerous small scandals were endured over five years of this minority government. In particular, the government breached their promise of greater transparency many times in ways that shocked political veterans, other parties and the media. They were rewarded, not with defeat, but with a majority government.

To the extent that scholars have been able to document strategies that are proprietary to the Conservative party, it is clear that the difference between the outcomes for the two parties lies in the Conservatives’ use of political marketing. Through information gained from political marketing, the Conservatives targeted the right groups of voters with the messages that would appeal to them and framed the issues in ways these voters could support. They did not allow themselves to be diverted from their core messages, even when faced with sustained negative media coverage and political opposition. In this way, moving incrementally over the period of five years as a minority government, they convinced just enough targeted voters that they were not scary right-wingers, and that they deserved their vote. Their next goal—a Conservative hegemony—will take a generation to reach.

The Conservatives came to power on a platform that emphasized accountability to citizens after the excesses of the Liberals. However, although they established different mechanisms and passed a
law on accountability, they broke the rules themselves. For example, they established a Parliamentary Budget Office, headed by their own appointee, but refused to give the PBO the information it needed to assess government accountability. Instead, the government challenges such attempts to uncover their practices, often through the courts, but also by stonewalling the opposition in daily parliamentary Question Period and avoiding media questioning, thus impeding transparency by withholding or manipulating information needed for citizenship.

Political marketing offers an attractive array of strategic communication tools and opportunities with promising results for late democracies beyond Canada. It is also an extremely useful and successful stratagem for political parties that strategize to campaign and govern for certain segments of society only, and whose communication strategies rely on the increasing non-attention, lack of trust and eventual lack of political participation by citizens that the parties themselves have fostered in campaigns both prior to and while in office. Seen as manipulation by the public, these communication practices foster political inattention and discourage citizens other than partisans and targeted voters from engaging in political life. The public cannot readily discern the difference between a public communication campaign such as the Economic Action Plan, which should be non-partisan, and actual communication products emanating from a political party, because the former has become politicized. It will remain difficult to decipher what, if anything, can be taken as neutral in politics and what is interested and purposeful.

Political marketing solidifies marketing behavior as a more technologized and advanced version of strategic communication. Its use in politics, in an era of downsized governments with fewer checks and balances, and the market ethos of NPM, coupled with the urge of political parties to centralize and dominate through the use of marketing methods in their strategic communication, could soon be the norm in the permanent campaigns of the future.

However, it is difficult to reconcile political marketing with the needs of citizens and with the extensive form of democracy envisaged in the post-WW2 era. Strategic communication is always interested and purposeful when used by powerful entities such as the state to, in effect, purchase that audience at a critical juncture that benefits the perpetrator. As Hallahan et al. (2007) point out, such communication excludes, narrows and focuses in ways that are incompatible with democratic communication to citizens (p. 4). The examples here show that even government information campaigns to inform citizens involve some subtle or overt layer of persuasion that aids the government in power, and, increasingly, they involve many different practices of publicity in massive, expensive, multi-media campaigns disseminated widely but selectively.

Given the political environment analyzed in this chapter, it is difficult to believe that strategic communication and political marketing serve the public interest. Such communication suggests impoverishment of the public’s ability truly to make political choices. Social actors also have more opportunities to intervene in politics; however, we need to acknowledge as well that there are power imbalances that impede citizen challenges to government actions. Civil society groups themselves can and do use strategic communication to counter and resist government strategies and messages; however, this is not necessarily from a position of power, which has a direct impact on the ability of these social actors to be heard in a crowded media landscape. Moreover, such audience denigration may represent a return to the one-way transmission model of communications conceptualized and critiqued by James Carey (1989), instead of the more democratic and interactive ritual model that “helps us explain how we build shared reality and culture in social groups, including in organizations, even as we account for constant change” (Bell, Golombisky, & Holtzhausen, 2002, p. 5, cited in Hallahan et al., 2007). The media, which are relied on to interpret political behavior on behalf of the public, face their own structural constraints in fulfilling their democratic function, a reality (and an opportunity) not lost on politicians and governments.

On their own, the issues facing the public and the media draw needed attention to the ethical dimension of strategic communication in politics, both in Canada and elsewhere. Given the
intransigence of the Conservative government in not governing transparently or in the interests of the public—the whole public, not just targeted segments of it—as one example, how can suitable strategic communication, and its political marketing offshoot, be used in public environments, especially when the state–public relationship is already asymmetrical?

The superficial banality of political marketing implies that it is a neutral tool, when in fact it is imbued with the differentiated power of those who purchase it and those who consume it. Lost in the middle is any notion that information is different from other commodities, with its dual material and symbolic aspects (Mosco, 2009), and thus needs to be handled carefully and ethically in public applications. This, of course, is at odds with the instrumental understanding of political marketing in that it gets results and that such results are neutral. For political communication, in the short term, that self-interested result is electoral success. In the long term, however, it is hegemony: an ideological regime shift.

In conclusion, a critical communication approach reveals the unequal power relations between state and citizen relations that impoverish political culture. It also reveals the nature of the growing use of strategic communication in recent Canadian political history, as well as the reach of the New Right’s coalescence of its market hegemony (Lilleker & Scullion, 2008, p. 3). Furthermore, and more broadly, this approach allows us to see how the instrumental use of political marketing commodifies citizens as consumers. Political marketing can claim considerable electoral success in the short term, but risks further alienation of citizens over time and should be considered cautiously by governments that value a vibrant public sphere.

References
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