The Poetics and Politics of Antiquity in the Long Nineteenth-Century / Exploiting Exploitation Cinema

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Synopsis

1. The Permanent Campaign co-authored by Greg Elmer, Ganaele Langlois and Fenwick McKelvey deals with political communication and confrontation in the digital age. The three scholars argue that contemporary political campaigning is typified by its nonstop character and pronounced polarization. Political wrangling continues online with the circulation of user-generated issue-objects. In each chapter the authors back their assumptions with a case study.

2. The authors begin by tracing the phrase “permanent campaign” to know who first used it and find that Patrick H. Caddell, an advisor to president-elect Jimmy Carter in the 1970s, was its originator. He suggested Jimmy Carter to perpetually campaign to gain public support. But ceaseless campaigning is detrimental to governance: “the perils of permanent campaigning lie in the privileging of partisanship over governance” (3). Indeed after seizing power, politicians have to devote their time to the problems the nation or country is faced with. Once elections are over, campaigns have to stop. Then the authors offer a contemporary definition of permanent campaigning. To them it is the ardent willingness of politicians to harness the possibilities of web 2.0 platforms. They
also add that another salient characteristic of contemporary permanent campaigning is the exacerbation of polarization. What are the causes of permanent campaigns in the digital age? The authors assume that “the bureaucratization of political parties and unstable minority coalition governments” (2) are some of the causes of permanent campaigning in the digital age. The authors write that networked permanent campaigning rests on three critical components: web 2.0 platforms (notably social media), political actors (partisans and activists), and lastly issue-objects (blog posts, videos...) that are elements of contemporary political communication.

In the second chapter they give a concrete example of permanent campaigning in cyberspace. The content of this chapter is based on the findings from two case studies, the 2008 coalition crisis and the 2009 prorogation crisis in Canada. The 2008 coalition crisis resulted from a Conservative Party-backed bill that would have stripped opposition parties of vital funds. As a consequence the latter planned to form a coalition to defeat the Conservative Party of which the then Prime Minister Stephen Harper was a member. The premier prorogued parliament fearing a vote of no confidence. In other words the Prime Minister put an end to parliamentary activities before the set date. The authors' findings show that during that crisis polarization was intense both offline and online. Online the number of blog posts dramatically surged as pro-conservative and anti-conservative bloggers debated that issue. The 2009 prorogation crisis was another illustration of contemporary permanent campaigning. It was provoked by Stephen Harper’s decision to suspend parliamentary activities. This time, political wrangling spread to the social networking site Facebook through user-generated objects such as anti- and pro-prorogation Facebook groups.

The third chapter is predicated on the formation of issue-publics thanks to social networks. It is the logical continuation of Chapter Two in which Greg Elmer et al. dissected the creation of objects on Facebook. These objects are created by publics engaged in political confrontation in web 2.0 platforms, notably Facebook. Web 2.0 platforms are depicted as spaces where political discourse is conducive to political action. Before moving on to how they intend to show the coming into being of issue-publics, the authors assume that social networks are spaces of expression for ordinary people, unlike the mainstream media that tend to give the lion’s share to the elite. This assumption prepares the reader for the various factors or conditions that paved the way for the emergence of issue-publics.

In order to determine whether social networks permit the emergence of issue-publics, the authors studied a couple of cases, notably people’s use of Facebook during the 2007 Ontario provincial election and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation-sponsored Great Canadian Wish List. The first case study shows that publics mobilized on Facebook both for partisan and issue-based motives. Indeed while the higher percentage of Facebook groups was relating to partisanship, the most popular group in terms of number of members were centered on issues. The authors thus conclude that social networks serve as a tribune for marginalized publics and issues social networking sites allow for the rise of a new type of actor, “the aggregated publics that come into being around specific sets of issues and attempt to change the political agenda by making their issues more visible, using the informational logic of the platform” (68). This assertion is all the more true according to the authors as these publics and issues were ignored by the mainstream media. Indeed the issues that are not or poorly debated in the mainstream media can be abundantly discussed online by people. These publics in the words of the authors, to
which the mainstream media did not attach much importance, are now a political force thanks to their ever-growing ranks. Their number enables them to have a sort of agenda setting power. Permanent campaigning is also evidenced via the Great Canadian Wish List. It was an initiative of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation to know Canadians’ top priorities or wishes. Canadians had to vote online on Facebook.

The wish that topped the list was the abolition of abortion closely followed by the right to abortion. The authors wonder if that result reflected the wish of most Canadians. They rather think that it is the consequence of a strategic use of social media’s conventions. Pro-life activists massively mobilized and voted online, and so did pro-choice activists, but presumably the extent of their mobilization was slightly inferior to that of their opponents.

In the fourth chapter, the authors analyze the unfolding of a political campaign via a social media platform. In anticipation of the 2007 federal elections in Australia, the web’s leading information aggregator, Google, convinced Australia’s chief political parties to upload their campaign-related videos to a website termed “Google votes Australia”. The site became a hub for videos exclusively dedicated to the 2007 federal elections. According to the authors, the Google-sponsored project proves that contemporary permanent campaigning rests on the three components they identified in the opening chapter of the book: actors, platforms and issue-objects. For this case study, actors were partisans and bloggers supporting the different political parties, the platform was jointly offered by Google and YouTube through the “Australia Votes” Portal. The objects were of course the many user-generated videos that were uploaded, commented on, or remixed by actors. Greg Elmer, Ganaele Langlois and Fenwick McKelvey assume that the 2007 federal elections in Australia were a turning point as they offered a template for later online political campaigns. The findings of the case study showed that the Labour Party-sponsored footages were more viewed than those of the Australian Liberal Party. The study also highlights how digital objects (videos) can circulate across platforms. As a conclusion, the authors write on the basis of their findings that the Google Votes Australia Project was a successful instance of campaign or election mediatization. In a nutshell, Google wanted to render the 2007 Australian federal elections media friendly.

The fifth chapter consists in an extensive demonstration of the impact of social media platforms’ conventions on the digital objects related to permanent campaigning. To prove this impact, the authors worked in tandem with a team of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation to analyze the tweets of the live debate between the candidates of the two main political parties during the 2008 federal elections in Canada. The two candidates who debated were the incumbent conservative Prime Minister Stephen Harper and his challenger Jack Layton of the New Democratic Party. After monitoring the activity on Twitter in the course of the live debate, the authors found that the volume of tweets spiked when Jack Layton used a witty remark. The partisans of the New Democratic Party were so impressed by that remark that they retweeted it word for word. Retweeting it again and again was a tactic to increase its durability and visibility on Twitter, a time sensitive platform. But the opponents of the New Democratic Party derided Jack Layton’s words. The authors came to the conclusion that partisans or online activists bypass the conventions of platforms or tactically harness them to expand the visibility of their digital objects (tweets). Their deconstruction of the debate-related tweets also proved the nonstop character of political confrontation in the digital age.
In the penultimate chapter the authors want to assess the impact of online political campaigning. To do so they do not resort to the circulation of hyperlinks like other new media researchers. They use a tag or keyword-based approach. They justify this approach by assuming that the essence of social networks is the generation and above all the circulation of content. Keywords or tags are among this user-generated content. The tracking of keywords across the web enables scholars to determine the numerous avenues of online political campaigning and its reach. Greg Elmer et al. refer to two examples that are supportive of their claim. They study the cross-platform circulation of the “Stand up for Canada” phrase and the “Yes We Can” slogan of the 2008 Obama campaign. The former was first used on the Canadian Conservative Party’s website and migrated to other platforms proving its reach. The latter went viral and fulfilled many a function. The “Yes We Can” slogan was a pointer to other websites of the 2008 Obama campaign. It was also conducive to homophily as partisans or party members could get in touch with one another. It served too as a political strategy to gauge its online impact via the extent of its circulation and the online actors who shared it within a platform and across others.

In the concluding chapter two of the three components of contemporary permanent campaigns are defined: “(...) throughout the book we sought to integrate and define actor as contingent human component in a networked politics, one that develop new skills and literacies (learning the rules of the platforms) in an effort to highlight their issues” (132). Next, the authors throw more light on the concept of object: “the mediated object (images, blog post, video, comment, etc.) is the political issue-object that is uploaded, shared, remixed, liked, commented upon, downloaded, and so forth (...) they come to prove debate, to comment or more proactively, to serve as a call to arms for other forms of political action and campaigning” (132). The authors wrap up their lengthy analysis by writing that “permanent campaigning” signifies not only a willingness or an obligation to make political campaigning media friendly, to mediatize it in the vernacular of new media research but also continuous political confrontation in cyberspace via the circulation of issue-objects.

Discussion

The issues discussed by these scholars had already been extensively dealt with at the time the book was published. Their definition of permanent campaign is far from being novel. Their idea of a heightened polarization on account of web 2.0 platforms has been abundantly explored by researchers such Cass Sunstein (2001), Adamic & Glance (2005), Baum & Groeling (2008). The authors also analyze partisans’ or publics’ use of web 2.0 platforms to make themselves heard or increase their visibility as they put it. It is quite predictable in periods of crisis or during major political events such as elections, polarization is intense offline and naturally spreads into the digital space. Cooper (2006) demonstrated it by exploring the Rathergate or Memogate which sparked fierce bickering in the US political blogosphere as progressive bloggers deplored conservative bloggers’ vehement criticisms against Dan Rather, the then CBS anchor accused of trying to discredit president Bush Jr.

The gatekeeping function of the media and the democratization of political activism have been extensively explored too. The authors deal with these two themes when explaining the emergence of issue-publics. Some issues are deliberately ignored by mainstream
media either because they are too thorny, ambiguous or because of their triviality. In the vernacular of journalism, they aren’t “newsworthy”. Nonetheless web 2.0 platforms enable publics to discuss them and advocate concrete actions. The authors assume that social networking sites circumvent mainstream media’s agenda setting power and afford a tribune to marginalized publics. A host of authors have already analyzed such questions. On this point, Jacques Gerstlé wrote : « (...) l’engagement dans la conversation politique est la forme la plus achevée de participation politique des citoyens ordinaires » (Gerstlé, 2004, 230). Wallsten (2008) dissected that question in an article in which he tried to determine the functions of political blogs. Among these were conversation starters and mobilizers. Kerbel (2009) in his Netroots : Online Progressives and the Transformation of American Politics also expanded on the question of the democratization of political activism. The concept of mediatization has been vastly explored since the advent of new media. The mediatization of a campaign was studied by among others Bimber & Davis (2003) and Teachout & Streeter (2008). The 2007 mediatization of the Federal elections in Australia wasn’t unprecedented in the sense that, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the campaign teams of Bill Clinton, Al Gore and, most importantly, Howard Dean, endeavored to mediatize the elections in which they were engaged.

If some of the issues discussed in this book have already been extensively analyzed by other academics, it also has several merits. The authors systematically resort to case studies to support their assumptions. They adopt a seldom-used approach to assess or determine the impact of online political campaigning via the tracking of keywords. This must be praised as it could have been easier for the authors to resort to the more commonly used hyperlink analysis. More to the point, the authors endeavor to expose or identify the innumerable implicit functions of these tags. The authors have managed to write a concise, but very informative book on the mediatization of politics that adds to our better understanding of contemporary political communication and confrontation.

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