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Is Social Media Transforming Canadian Electioneering? Hybridity and Online Partisan Strategies in the 2012 Quebec Election

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Abstract

This article investigates the extent to which provincial political parties made use of social media in their strategy, organization and communication in order to achieve their electoral goals during the Quebec 2012 general election. Using data from a series of 19 interviews conducted with online strategists and campaign directors from the five leading parties active in the 2012 election, we identify the strategic objectives these organizations followed when developing their social media campaigns. The strategists' narratives reveal that social media became a central component of electioneering and that parties were carrying out, in various forms, hybrid campaigns that combined traditional and emergent communication technologies and employed both old and new types of organizational principles.

Keywords: Online politics; Quebec; Strategies; Elections; Social Media; Hybridization

Résumé

Cet article examine dans quelle mesure les partis politiques provinciaux ont inclus les médias sociaux dans leur stratégie, l'organisation et la communication de campagne pour atteindre leurs objectifs lors des élections générales de 2012 au Québec. À l'aide des données provenant d'une série de 19 entrevues menées auprès de stratèges et de directeurs de campagne des cinq principaux partis lors de l'élection de 2012, nous relevons les objectifs stratégiques poursuivis par ces derniers dans l'élaboration de leurs campagnes numériques. Les propos des stratèges révèlent que les médias sociaux sont devenus un élément central de l'organisation électorale et que les partis menaient, sous diverses formes, des campagnes hybrides dans lesquelles les technologies de communication traditionnelles et émergentes ainsi que d'anciens et de nouveaux types de principes organisationnels étaient combinés.

Mots-clés: Politique en ligne; Québec; Stratégies; Élections; Médias socionumériques; Hybridité

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Introduction

Although Canadian political communication tends to be viewed as lagging behind that of the United States, digital technology has been steadily changing the way politicians communicate with voters in Canada. North of the 49th parallel, political parties communicate on diverse digital platforms, collect voters' data online and consider citizens as political content producers and therefore key players in elections (Small et al., 2014: 4). Parties seem to have adapted quickly to the ever-changing communication environment, which raises the issue of hybridization of election campaigns. In Canada, particularly at the provincial level, little research has directly studied the strategic objectives driving online practices during an election. As a way to fill this gap, this article investigates the extent to which provincial parties in Quebec engaged in hybrid campaigning during the 2012 election by using social media in their strategy, organization and communication to achieve their electoral goals.

Why Study #QC2012?

In contrast to previous campaigns, each of the major contending parties in the 2012 Quebec general election had an official presence on all of the prominent social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. Quebec's multiparty, highly regulated and first-past-the-post electoral system are institutional factors that make this election an interesting context to investigate, and it is an election that, according to the literature, could have an impact on the extent to which the use of social media becomes an integral part of electoral strategy (see Enli and Moe, 2013; Gibson, 2013). Quebec's electoral laws, characterized by an "egalitarian approach", limit both contributions and expenditures, which affects political communication resources available for campaigning (Small, 2009).

In 2012, voting intentions were close between the three leading parties: the Liberal Party of Québec (LPQ), the Parti Québécois (PQ) and the recently formed Coalition Avenir Québec (CAQ). Furthermore, two smaller left-leaning opposition parties—Option Nationale (ON) and Québec Solidaire (QS)—were gathering significant attention from traditional media for their active online communication. The campaign was therefore hotly contested, both online and offline.

The election took place in a specific social context: Quebec was still feeling the effects of its traumatic Maple Spring, a historic protest movement against university tuition hikes. According to Raynauld et al., Quebec's Maple Spring "can be viewed as one of the first grassroots-intensive political movements in Canada where social media played an instrumental role" (2016: 23). After several months of social conflict, the outgoing Liberal government, having failed to maintain its framing of the crisis (Giasson and Dubois, 2018), launched the electoral campaign on August 1st for a September 4th ballot.¹

¹ The 2012 election ended with the narrow victory of the Parti Québécois (54 seats, 31.95% of the vote) over the Liberals of Jean Charest (50 seats, 31.20%), followed by the CAQ (19 seats, 27.05%) and QS (2

In preparation for the election, the LPQ, which had been virtually absent from social media prior to 2008, built its Web 2.0 presence throughout the course of its last mandate, asking members of its parliamentary caucus, its ministers and its party officials to create Facebook and Twitter accounts in order to engage directly with Internet users. The PQ, which was the official opposition, had developed an active presence online prior to the 2008 election. By 2012, it had established a broad network of social media outlets, including Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, on which it was broadcasting its message and engaging with voters. QS was also active online, making extensive use of social media to counter its relative absence in traditional news coverage. In addition, two newer political parties, the sovereignist and social-democratic ON and the right-to-centre CAQ (built on the remnants of the former Action démocratique du Québec), were entering the race in 2012. Both had to overcome deficits, including a lack of name recognition by the general public and a lack of visibility in the mainstream press, and both turned to social media, especially Twitter, in order to reach traditional media and influencers, as well as average citizens who were following politics online.

Social Media, MyBO, and Electioneering

The 2008 American presidential campaign is often described in the literature as the turning point for when social media became a fundamental tool of post-modern campaigning. Much of the research has focused on the transformative aspect of my.barackobama.com (known as MyBO), an online platform built on the format of a social networking site and created to help the Obama camp harness the efforts of Internet users interested in taking part in the candidate's campaign (Chadwick, 2017: 135; Kreiss, 2012; Nielsen, 2012: 56–57). It also allowed the Obama campaign to collect an impressive database of socio-demographic and political information based on the millions of individuals who registered on the site. Some have claimed that MyBO was instrumental in the candidate's victory (Kreiss, 2012: 18–21; Vaccari, 2010: 319) and a model to be followed for other campaign organizations wishing to harness the power of online volunteers who could contribute efficiently to offline electoral success.

However, that is only one side of the story. Others have argued that the much-hyped MyBO could be more of an outlier than previously suggested (Enli and Moe, 2013; Vaccari, 2013: ix) and that online communication innovations developed for the American presidential system are not readily generalizable to other electoral contexts. There have been calls for investigations into “less obvious” cases of multiparty systems and of legislative elections where partisan identification and electoral regulations remain strong, in order to better understand the similarities and differences that institutional, social and cultural factors may play in why and how political parties adopt or resist technological innovations (Enli and Moe, 2013; Gibson, 2013). We believe the 2012 Quebec general election represents one of these “less obvious” cases, even while noting that no two campaigns are similar, and there is no single winning formula. Flanagan is right in stressing that elections are “waged within a specific context of rules, which have a major effect in determining which strategies will be viable” (2010: 156).

Parties have developed volunteer mobilizing platforms similar to MyBO in other systems, including the UK (Gibson, 2013) and Canada (Delacourt, 2016; McKelvey and Piebiak, 2016), with

seats, 6.03%). ON failed to elect a single candidate, garnering only 1.9% of the popular vote. ON ultimately merged with QS on December 10, 2017, after two years of negotiations.

varying levels of longevity and effectiveness. However, with a few exceptions (Gibson et al., 2014; Jackson and Lilleker, 2009; Karlsen, 2009; Lilleker and Jackson, 2013; Vaccari, 2013), research has primarily been focused on the American context, in general, and on presidential campaigns, in particular (Bor, 2013; Chadwick, 2017; Kreiss, 2012; Vaccari, 2010). Therefore, little is known about how social media are being integrated into the strategic organization of campaigns and about their tactical deployment.

The Hybridization of Campaigns

Regardless of whether the MyBO experience of 2008 is considered a trailblazer or an exception, it is clear that digital technologies have changed the way parties organize for elections and how they campaign during them. Social media platforms are rapidly modifying the way campaign preparation and electioneering is conducted in the US and elsewhere (Chadwick, 2017; Gibson, 2013; Kreiss, 2012; Vaccari, 2010). These practices can have an impact on campaigns in two ways: first, they can provide strategists and campaign managers with tools to gather resources, better understand and segment the electorate, and target audiences (Auter and Fine, 2018; Kreiss, 2012; Lilleker and Jackson, 2013; Nielsen, 2012); and second, they can help organize the ground campaign by mobilizing online users. In both instances, these changes have been depicted as a form of campaign hybridization, in which new tools and practices directly modify the way electoral strategy is conceived and implemented. These hybrid campaigns often result in a significant input of online party activists and supporters. Chadwick's model of hybrid campaigns depicts the intricate integration of online and offline communication channels, as well as the novel compromise of grassroots activism and elite control in the organization and implementation of electoral strategies (2017: 130). Online media logic and traditional media logic therefore cohabit and enhance each other (Chadwick, 2017: 133–40).

The analyses of Vaccari (2010), Bor (2013), Gibson (2013) and Penney (2017a; 2017b: 101–3) also reveal how parties that are active online, especially on social media platforms, must reach a compromise between the strategic importance of staying on message and the demands of Internet users who want to actively participate in the campaign's implementation both online and offline. Organizations often must accept some loss of control over elements of their communication strategies, including ads, posters and slogans that will likely be modified, commented upon, ridiculed and shared online over the course of a campaign.

In Canada, political science research on digital media and politics has focused mostly on how parties communicate with voters and citizens on social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook (Chen, 2010; Small, 2008, 2010, 2014; Verville, 2012; Sullivan and Bélanger, 2016). Most of these studies highlight the difficulty political parties have in using social media in a dialogic and interactive way and how they therefore undertake online “not-so-social” campaigning. Apprehension over loss of message control is commonly given as an explanation for the reticence of political parties to be more open to feedback, dialogue and coproduction on social networking and microblogging sites.

Yet there is a silver lining for campaigns in this loss of control, which comes in the form of the volunteer mobilizing sites that are now being used by parties around the world to rally online party activists and supporters and provide them with tools and tactics to campaign online and offline. These sites are implemented to ensure message cohesiveness, resource collection and

voter mobilization. Vaccari, citing an Obama strategist from the 2008 campaign, suggests that MyBO was designed to stimulate online users' participation and to maintain message cohesiveness. Even though the platform gave the impression that it was a bottom-up, grassroots initiative, it was, in effect, a centralized operation designed to provide Internet supporters with scripts, tools and arguments that could be used to organize events and carry the Obama message—and to do so mostly offline. It was “carefully controlled citizen participation”, where individuals were channelled and guided. “When you are guiding something, you are not controlling it, you have people who are following you willingly to that message” (Vaccari, 2010: 332). As a consequence, organizations who use these sites must trust Internet users' organizational and communication abilities, as well as their willingness to conform to the provided strategy.

Research Questions and Method Design

In order to better assess the extent of hybridization in electoral organization using the 2012 Quebec election as a case study, we address two research questions. First, we are interested in uncovering the strategic objectives underlying the use of social media platforms by the political parties. For what purposes were the main contending parties in the election campaigning on social networking, microblogging and files sharing sites? Recent research indicates that parties follow three broad categories of strategic objectives in their social media presence: communication objectives, political objectives and marketing objectives (see, for example, Bor, 2013; Chadwick, 2017; Karlsen, 2009; Kreiss, 2012; Nielsen, 2012; Vaccari, 2010). These objectives are not mutually exclusive, since parties often aim to achieve all three types simultaneously in the course of an online campaign. Communication objectives refer to a party's desire to broadcast its electoral messages, personalize its leader's and candidates' communications, correct or “spin” coverage of its campaign and attack the campaigns of its opponents. Political objectives are associated with winning the election, mobilizing supporters, getting out the vote, gaining visibility, generating resources (such as donations and volunteers) and promoting an ideology or political project (the core political values of the party, not its electoral platform). Marketing objectives refer to activities such as collecting voter information data, creating a relationship with voters by managing a community, microtargeting voters and gaining the information necessary to make adjustments to the party's campaign strategy.

Second, we investigate the level of hybridization present in the strategic organization, content dissemination and voter mobilization of each campaign: How integrated were social media platforms in the conception and implementation phases of the campaigns? What forms did this hybridity take in the campaign of each party? Were newer tools, tactics and experiences combined with older approaches—and, if they were, did the combined strategies create a hybrid form of campaigning that blended top-down and bottom-up operations and communications in a way similar to that observed in other national contexts?

These questions deal with the organizational aspects of campaigns. In order to provide answers to them, we conducted semi-structured expert interviews with individuals who were directly involved in the design and implementation of the parties' online strategies. Qualitative interviews have only rarely been used in Canadian research on social media and politics, which generally relies on online content analyses to infer strategic objectives. However, a qualitative

approach can be particularly relevant when studying political communication in the context of rapid social and media changes (Karpf et al., 2015).

Our interviewees were campaign chairs, communication directors, social media advisers and online content and community managers from the five main parties that contested the Quebec 2012 election. Our questionnaire contained 36 open-ended questions covering seven topics dealing with the conception and implementation of online campaigns: strategic objectives, target audiences, e-political marketing practices, budgets, labour management, openness to content generated by Internet users, and organizational hierarchy. We initially contacted 29 individuals, and we completed 19 interviews, for a response rate of 65 per cent. Five interviews were conducted with strategists from the PQ, two from the LPQ, three from the CAQ, four from ON and five from QS. Our sample comprises two national campaign chairs, four national communication directors, four online campaign directors, as well as nine content and community managers who were all closely involved in different phases of strategic development or tactical implementation of the campaigns. As Vaccari astutely notes, including individuals acting on different levels of decision-making and campaign management in a sample of respondents allows researchers to “minimize the risk of overestimating the role of technology and neglecting other crucial organizational and political variables” (2010: 323). Interviews were conducted in person, from May 8, 2013, to June 4, 2013. The interviews took an average of 75 minutes and were transcribed in text format to facilitate content analysis.

In order to identify each party’s strategic objectives associated with its use of social media platforms, we coded the transcripts of respondents’ answers using the content analysis software QDA Miner. The deductive software searches the documents for specific expressions and key words (known as “codes”) listed in predetermined dictionaries that represent analytical categories. It locates these codes in the corpus and calculates the numbers of occurrences of the dictionary they are associated with. Sixteen dictionaries were designed for this study in order to measure the importance that respondents gave to different aspects of the communication, political and marketing objectives.² The analysis was conducted in three phases. We initially undertook a qualitative analysis of all 19 interviews in order to highlight recurrent terms and expressions used by respondents to depict their strategic objectives. We then created the 16 dictionaries and ran three waves of tests, during which keywords were added or modified to make our analytical categories more inclusive and accurate. Finally, we individually reviewed each mention identified by the software within its original context to ensure that it had been appropriately coded and that it represented adequately what the respondent meant to say. It should be noted that the generated quantitative data serve an illustrative purpose by highlighting the recurrence with which various elements were discussed during our conversations and the degree of agreement of the interviewees on the main findings of the

² The detailed 16 dictionaries can be provided on request. However, we list here the categories associated with each of the three types of objectives: (1) communication objectives: broadcast a partisan message, events and leader tour, control/spin the message, broadcast media content; (2) political objectives: generate resources, promote an ideology, getting known/increase name recognition, get votes/“get out the vote” (GOTV), online mobilization, offline mobilization; and (3) marketing objectives: collect voter data, market research, targeting, relationship/community building, strategy adjustment. For each of these categories, a list of codes (keywords and expressions) has been produced. Each dictionary includes a distinctive list of codes.

study. However, data presentation relies mostly on a qualitative approach, in which illustrative excerpts from the narratives of interviewed strategists are quoted.

[Table 1. Percentage of Mentions to Strategic Objectives in Social Media Use]

Results: A Tale of Asymmetric Hybridity

Unsurprisingly, since election campaigns are primarily communication campaigns, a clear majority of strategists from all the political parties stated that the main strategic objective for using social media was communication and that digital platforms were considered to be a particularly effective way to broadcast messages to audiences. However, our analysis also reveals interesting differences in the types of communication objectives strategists expressed in their answers and in the relative importance that political and marketing objectives played in the different social media campaigns. As Table 1 indicates, strategists from the three main parties in this close election—the outgoing Liberals, the PQ and the CAQ—all mentioned the dominance of communication objectives grounding their respective strategies. Respondents from the LPQ mentioned communication objectives three times more often than the other two categories. The data in Table 2 also confirm this by revealing that Liberal strategists stated more often than their opponents that they used social media platforms to control and spin their message or to attack opposing parties, two core communication objectives.

On the other hand, interviewees from ON and QS stated a more balanced range of strategic objectives, including political ones. For instance, as shown in Table 3, they—along with interviewees from the PQ—were more likely to mention social media as useful tools for mobilizing voters online, getting more votes, or increasing a campaign’s visibility. In comparison, the two centre-right parties, the CAQ and the LPQ, mentioned hardly any political objectives associated with their use of social media. Furthermore, respondents from the three main parties referred to marketing objectives more frequently than their counterparts did from the two smaller parties (see Table 4). However, these mentions, especially those associated with voter targeting and voter data collection, were provided in answers pointing toward what the party hoped to do in upcoming elections rather than what it had done in the 2012 campaign, as this quote from a CAQ respondent illustrates: “We could have done more and we will do more during the next campaign, especially with data, as we saw in the last American campaign. We are working on a better integration of communication, databases and social media.” However, mentions of strategy adjustment and community building were referring directly to the 2012 social media campaigns.

These aggregated data are useful in identifying online campaigning trends among the five parties studied in the 2012 election. However, they do not highlight the numerous differences inherent in each campaign. Therefore, we analyzed separately the narratives of strategists from each of the five parties, in order to offer a more detailed account of how social media adoption contributed to the hybridity of campaigning in the election. We discuss them here, moving from the more recent to the older parties in the Quebec political system. We begin with Option Nationale, which ran the most hybrid campaign in 2012, despite numerous operational challenges.

[Table 2. Percentage of Mentions to Communication Objectives]

[Table 3. Percentage of Mentions to Political Objectives]

[Table 4. Percentage of Mentions to Marketing Objectives]

Option Nationale: The pure player

ON, the newest kid on the political block in the 2012 election, was founded in October 2011 by ex-PQ Member of the National Assembly (MNA) Jean-Martin Aussant, following his very public departure from the PQ. ON took a strong stand in favour of Quebec's independence and openly positioned itself as a progressive social-democratic formation but had little time or financial resources to organize its first campaign. Even so, it was able to quickly mobilize active and young members, many of whom had been involved in the student movement of early 2012. According to all the ON strategists we met with, social media platforms were quickly considered to be the most efficient means to circumvent the party's lack of resources traditionally used for organizing, coordinating and implementing an electoral campaign. ON respondents predominantly mentioned both communication and political objectives as guiding their social media strategy. These objectives were mostly focused on counteracting their lack of coverage in traditional media and lack of name recognition with the public. The young and relatively unknown party wanted to quickly gain media attention and increase the party's visibility.

One ON respondent's answer summarized this challenge: "I'll say that our first goal was to get the party known, through social media, but also through traditional media." The party started the campaign without any physical electoral headquarters, choosing to invest most of its limited financial and human resources in getting their leader elected in his home riding. The party's electoral committee made the decision to turn to Facebook as a way to organize both online and ground campaign operations. A few weeks before the election was called, the campaign chair and the communications director created a private Facebook group, which was used for strategic meetings dedicated to conceptualizing and coordinating the campaign. As the election call grew closer, the number of participants in these daily meetings expanded and often included the leader of the party, as well as party volunteers described as "ambassadors". The volunteer ambassadors were asked to disseminate the party's messages; they also helped monitor social media activity and engaged in multiple series of coordinated fast-paced online replies. It is from this Facebook group that the party ran its campaign, defined the contents of its daily communication strategy and gave instructions on how to broadcast its messages on the different online platforms, primarily YouTube and Twitter.

Another expression of ON's campaign hybridity was manifested in the frequent distribution through official party channels of content such as videos, infographs or memes that had originally been generated by Internet users. The party initiated a series of viral humorous images inspired by the "Hey Girl" series of memes featuring Hollywood actor Ryan Gosling, which instead depicted ON's party leader, Jean-Martin Aussant (see Figure 1). ON supporters followed suit by contributing additional images on the party's Tumblr page and by sharing them on their personal Facebook and Twitter accounts.

[Figure 1. Meme Featuring Jean-Martin Aussant, the 2012 Option Nationale Leader.]

ON was the clear underdog, since it was engaging in its first campaign with limited resources, lack of public awareness and little media interest. In order to overcome these challenges, the party ran a fully hybrid campaign in which new media tactics were used to attract old media attention. Social media were used to develop, coordinate and implement the strategy, with party officials sharing with online supporters the responsibilities of content production and decision making. ON's director of communications and social media mentioned that the Internet had ended up having a profound impact on their campaign: "It changed everything. We would not exist and we would not have gotten the support and votes we received. The bulk of our visibility came from social media. And when we got traditional news coverage, it was because we were present on social media. All of our visibility during the campaign came from the Web."

Coalition Avenir Québec: Tweet me a campaign

Although the CAQ's leader, François Legault, was another PQ defector, Quebec's second youngest party had nothing in common ideologically with ON. The CAQ became a registered party in November 2011, following the dissolution of the Action démocratique du Québec (ADQ) and its merging with Legault's movement, that had just been created in February of that year. The CAQ quickly rose to the top of the polls, often showing a close second or third to the governing Liberals or the PQ's official opposition. The party appealed to both Quebec's conservatives and its nationalists, thereby making gains at the expense of both the LPQ and the PQ. As the election neared, the CAQ was neck-and-neck in opinion polls with its two rivals, which garnered it significant attention from the media. Legault was a well-known political figure in Quebec, having held top ministerial portfolios in past PQ cabinets. The new party had money, a growing membership and a team of experienced organizers ready to tackle its first election. It ran a highly professional campaign, focused on communicating a tightly controlled and cohesive message—an approach more in line with the campaigns of larger traditional parties than with those carried out by smaller niche parties.

During their interviews, strategists from the CAQ overwhelmingly indicated that the party's main objective in campaigning on social media was to communicate the party message. Contrary to expectations that new political formations will generally use social media in interactive, open and hybrid ways, the CAQ instead followed what traditional government parties engage in: controlled, careful, top-down online campaigns. The party's lead social media strategist indicated that with social media, "you can broadcast you own message, the one you really wish to send. For example, we would record messages from the leader on the tour bus, then send the video on Twitter, Facebook and our website. It may have reached less people, but it is a way for the leader to communicate directly with voters without any traditional media filter."

Facebook and Twitter accounts were used to relay the party's official message of the day, which was sent out frequently from its leader's Twitter account. Legault personally tweeted a staggering 2,801 messages during the 34 days of campaign (an average of 80 tweets a day).³ The leader and the party brass were actively tweeting in order to broadcast their message, engage with reporters and react to the campaign online. Hybridity also manifested itself in the

³ By comparison, Elizabeth May, who was the most active politician on Twitter during the 2011 Canadian federal election, sent 419 tweets, an average of 12 tweets per day.

campaign organization when the party turned to Facebook analytics to target voters and broadcast political ads on the social networking site. CAQ strategists were all quite open about the vast potential they saw in the use of social media for political marketing activities. They mentioned that the party had collected voter information from their online and offline supporters, which was assembled within a database to be used for generating contributions and sending personalized messages to targeted voters. The CAQ, however, rarely engaged directly with online users. User-generated content was said not to have been included in the campaign, and no specific efforts were made to mobilize voters online or offline.

Québec Solidaire: Hybrid to the core

Along with ON, the left-wing QS ran the most hybrid campaign in 2012. This highly ideological, pro-independence, membership-based party has a decentralized decision-making process, with riding associations exercising significant levels of autonomy in ground campaign coordination. Starting with its creation in 2006, the party has been active online, quickly establishing a presence on Twitter in early 2008, mostly as a strategy to counteract the lack of coverage in mainstream media but also to mobilize support. However, the election of 2012 brought a new approach to online campaigning at QS. The party had put together its largest electoral budget to date and was generating increasing levels of support in pre-campaign polls, in part due to PQ infighting and the New Democratic Party (NDP) surge in the 2011 federal election. The party's communications director convinced the executive board to professionalize the design of the campaign and centre it around a strong hybrid strategy capable of integrating social media and mainstream media communication. They wanted to create, in accordance with their original grassroots tradition, a full-blown "2.0 campaign", with dialogue, interaction and coproduction as central tenets.

During the 2012 election contest, QS followed a strategy of balancing communication and political objectives in its social media campaign. QS interviewees frequently mentioned that when campaigning on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, the party wanted to mobilize voters both online and offline, get voters to the polls and promote the party's ideology. Online supporters were also seen as an important force to harness in order to attain these objectives. Therefore, QS contracted a Montreal-based communication agency known for its innovative social media initiatives supporting the student movement during the Maple Spring. Four consultants from this organization, all supporters of QS, designed the online communication strategy, as well as its core component, AGIR ("To Act"), an online volunteer mobilizing platform similar to MyBO, which would place citizens' inputs at the centre of QS's online campaign. One of QS's social media strategists described how the platform came about: "When we were thinking of concepts during the pre-campaign, we thought of a platform called AGIR, dedicated to recruiting supporters, aggregating information from ridings about their needs for volunteers or activities and to allow people to upload content, images, videos supporting QS so that web users could share them."

However, AGIR failed to generate the mobilization outcomes the party had hoped for. Fewer than 500 volunteers registered on the platform. Interviewees blamed this failure on the inability of local riding associations to correctly use and update the platform to manage citizen involvement. Some local party activists also considered AGIR to be a centralizing mechanism put in place by the party's executives to exercise tighter control over ground campaigns in ridings, an approach that they considered out of line with QS's egalitarian and decentralized decision-

making traditions. The agency also developed and managed a community of online activists tasked with protecting and controlling the party's "brand" and message online. Many interviewees from the other political parties recognized the efficiency of QS's social media community's ability to quickly engage in e-buttal and fact-checking, especially on Twitter during the election campaign. In a pure hybrid approach, social media was used to speak to traditional media and to generate a conversation online. The party also engaged in a strong visual campaign by producing infographic mini-posters illustrating its issue positions (see Figure 2), daily YouTube videos of its co-leaders' tours, as well as a series of five humoristic animated ads debunking recurrent myths about the party (that it was communist, that it had unrealistic policies, and so forth). These short videos went viral and attracted coverage from mainstream media. Finally, the party also welcomed user-generated content: videos, comments and questions from citizens were showcased in the party's official campaign. QS social media presence, in line with the party's decentralized organizational philosophy, was a truly hybrid experience that was manifested in operational management, message production and voter mobilization.

[Figure 2. Québec Solidaire Online Campaign Mini-poster.]

Parti Québécois: Shepherding the herd

The PQ entered the campaign in a virtual tie with the governing Liberals, with the new CAQ coming in a close third. Led by Pauline Marois, whose leadership had been tainted by a vicious episode of infighting in the spring of 2011 (which subsequently caused the defection of six MNAs and the creation of ON), the party seemed unable to turn the outgoing Liberal government's dismal popularity into increased PQ voting intentions. Marois and the independence project were considered liabilities for the party, and party executives understood that they had to put together a strong and cohesive campaign in order to have a chance of winning the 2012 election. The strategy was built around two elements: first, they would attack the nine years of Liberal governance and, second, they would present the PQ as a viable alternative for governance, a government-in-waiting ready for power. As content from our interviews revealed, social media would be used predominantly as a communication tool to implement this strategy, but it would also be used to organize both online and offline support.

The PQ is considered a difficult organization to lead; it has had frequent public outbursts of dissent over strategy, leadership and policy, and as a result, it often faces challenges in producing a cohesive campaign message. Yet according to many of our PQ interviewees, the party's 2012 campaign was one of its most disciplined to date and was certainly its most hybrid. Although observations in the literature leave the impression that online campaigns of traditional parties tend to generate a limited level of interaction, the PQ decided to invest in a dialogic campaign and put together the largest team of social media content producers and community managers of all the political parties. At the peak of the campaign, it could count on a coordinated cell of 20 people working exclusively on Internet strategy. These staffers worked round the clock during the 34 days of the campaign; they were tasked with monitoring the party's official social media presence (both for the national and 125 local campaigns) and answering questions and comments left by users; developing visual content (ads, mini-posters, videos); researching opponents' positions and generating e-attacks on them; and coordinating the PQ volunteer management platform. Communication objectives clearly dominated the agenda: the online campaign was designed to broadcast and control/spin the message.

However, the political objectives of online mobilization and getting votes were also frequently mentioned in the PQ interviews.

The PQ's director of technology indicated that online communication was included in strategy conception from the initial phases of campaign preparedness, a few months following the party's 2008 defeat and that the digital team had been given its largest operational budget to date. Their first strategic initiative was to create an online volunteer mobilization management platform called L'Atelier ("The Workshop"). The idea was brought to the party by one of its members who had spent some time with the Obama campaign in 2008. The platform was online in 2010, 18 months before the election was called, in order to establish a strong and easily accessible community of Internet supporters. L'Atelier was created as a social networking hub where online users, both card-carrying party members as well as sympathizers, could access information on campaign events, as well as organize activities in their respective riding, and also provide the site managers with observations, comments and suggestions about local political activity. Information flows ran both ways. The platform's lead strategist indicated that the site not only allowed the party to control its message and mobilize the site's users by providing scripts, visuals and guides for online and offline activities, but it also gave the party access to local feedback about how the national campaign was perceived on the ground and how the campaign was faring compared to opposing campaigns. The PQ could then use the platform as a type of ongoing focus group. At the end of 2012 election, 3,000 volunteers and sympathizers had signed on to the platform, which was considered a success by most of the strategists we interviewed. As the Obama campaign did with MyBO, the PQ tightly supervised and guided the actions of its online volunteers. Party discipline was a core principle of the campaign strategy, along with feedback, openness and hybridity.

Another sign of hybridity came with the creation of an integrated advertising strategy that combined traditional TV ads with targeted Facebook ads. According to the interviewees, when new waves of ads were launched on the social networking site, these messages resulted in increased circulation on the party's official page. Interestingly, PQ respondents assigned a high degree of importance to monitoring their online initiatives' efficiency, which they felt helped them adjust their message during the campaign. As one respondent noted:

Another important aspect, [is that] we would gauge our influence and our daily impact through reactions on social media. If we came out with a negative message, we would get online feedback with people saying they didn't like our stand on the issue. And it is important to measure this reaction to our strategy, image, content from our supporters and opponents. We still do it. We take it with a grain a salt, but it is useful information that must be included in the political decision-making process in the party.

Liberal Party of Québec: Business as usual

The Liberal party strategists we interviewed stressed communication objectives predominantly in their answers regarding the party's social media strategy. In 2012, following a difficult last year in government, during which the party was plagued with accusations of corruption and of engineering a social crisis during the student strikes to prevent electoral annihilation, the Liberals ran a cautious and cohesive social media strategy built around broadcasting and spinning their messages, as well as on attacks against their two main opponents, the PQ and the

CAQ. Interviewees were also more likely to express marketing objectives associated with their use of social media, including strategy adjustment, market research, voter data collection and voter targeting (see Table 4).

Hybridity was somewhat limited in the LPQ strategy. Online campaigning was seen as a communicative “compulsory figure”, which provided the party with new windows to display election promises and ads that had already been presented through more traditional channels. According to one of the Liberal interviewees, the 2008 Obama campaign had created expectations over how parties were supposed to use social media: “We were following what was going on in the United States, including the presidential election of Barack Obama. Their online strategy, its consequences and the way it was covered by the media forced parties to change how they were campaigning based on what had been done in the States. And this is what we implemented and tried to achieve between 2008 and 2012.”

In order to carry out this type of campaigning, the party assembled a team of staffers, known as The Squad, who worked round the clock on social media from the party war room, where they monitored and replied to Internet users’ comments and questions on the LPQ’s vast network of Facebook and Twitter accounts. Coordination of volunteer mobilization was managed locally in riding associations, under the supervision of the national campaign chair and the director of communications. The LPQ decided not to create a centralized online mobilizing platform. The campaign also produced original web content, including daily videos filmed on Premier Jean Charest’s tour bus, where he recapped his activities or sent support messages to Liberal viewers. The videos were uploaded on the party’s website and YouTube channel. The communication strategy also involved an e-buttal network called Les faits (The Facts), which was driven from a Twitter account and from a YouTube channel that featured videos of two young LPQ operatives broadcasting the party’s responses to attacks from opponents. In line with the organization’s objectives, these initiatives were designed to send top-down information. Dialogue, interaction, online user-generated content and mobilization were not key items on the Liberal’s social media list of priorities. One strategist discussed the prevalence of communication objectives in their strategy in this way: “Instead of one strong position a day, we had two or three strong positions, many messages, a multiplicity of ways to deliver them to many clientele.”

The two Liberal respondents indicated that the party wished to do more with social media in upcoming elections but noted that some of the Liberal core voting segments (older, immigrant, federalist Quebeckers) were less politically active online and could be reached more easily through traditional media activities. Therefore, in 2012, visibility in traditional mass media was still seen as a more valuable investment, with social media platforms being used primarily to relay what was produced offline. This situation corresponds to previous research on online campaigning that has depicted large traditional governing parties or incumbent candidates as likely to implement cautious and controlled social media strategies (Karpf 2012).

Conclusion

Our analysis of 19 expert interviews with campaign strategists from the five leading parties in the 2012 Quebec general election reveals numerous forms of hybridity in campaign organization. Respondents from all parties indicated that electioneering in Quebec now integrates old and new media approaches and increased levels of openness to user-generated

content and activism. Many also expressed growing interest in the political marketing potential of social media campaigning, especially with voter data collection and targeting. In this respect, 2012 may have been a transformational election that modified how campaigns will be organized and implemented in the future (Giasson et al., 2018).

However, hybridity took different forms and reached varied levels within the party system. Two of the political parties, Option Nationale and Québec Solidaire, ran fully integrated online campaigns, with social media as their central driver. ON brought the notion of “Internet parties” to another level, when it circumvented its lack of resources by conceptualizing and running its entire electoral operation from a private Facebook group and mobilized a network of Internet ambassadors tasked at disseminating messages of the day and protecting the party brand online. QS innovated by outsourcing the conception of its communication strategy to a social media cooperative that organized it around an online volunteer mobilization platform. These smaller, member-based, left-leaning parties conceptualized and enacted open, hybrid campaigns that were grounded in online activism and mobilization. They ran highly active and reactive social media campaigns that their rivals envied. However, as past research indicates, organizations traditionally engaging in such pure hybrid campaigns rarely fare well in opinion polls. Since they have much to gain, these marginal opposition parties do not appear to fear the negative consequences usually associated with loss of message control.

The strongest contenders to win an election and form a government—which were the LPQ, PQ and CAQ in 2012—are usually expected to be more risk-averse and more prone to running cautious, controlled and cohesive social media strategies (Karpf, 2012). However, all three political parties leading in the polls showed surprising levels of hybridity and openness to the interactive principles of social media in their strategic objectives and tactical actions. Understanding that every vote would count in this close election, the PQ made online mobilization one of the core tenets of its strategy and created an effective volunteer management website to carry out this goal during the campaign. L’Atelier allowed the party to assemble a community of online sympathizers and to select out of it a team of internet supporters (called “supermilitants”) who helped the party to maintain message cohesiveness throughout their social media presence. Faced with negative press coverage, the CAQ ran an active Twitter campaign lead primarily by its voluble leader, in order to rapidly address criticism and spin its message, and it invested massively in targeted ad placement on Facebook. And, finally, approaching their most difficult re-election exercise in two decades, the Liberals displayed an unexpectedly strong presence on social media, creating a strong e-buttal and fact-checking network on Twitter and YouTube, geared at organizing fast responses to attacks from opponents. Most of these initiatives were following strategic communication objectives: get the message out, control the message, attack opponents. Nevertheless, the initiatives were organized or implemented in hybrid forms, mixing traditional and digital media or bringing citizens into the campaign as active online marketing agents.

Our data show hybridization of electioneering in all five parties. Even with “new forms of risk that emerge when digital campaigning comes to include a more prominent role for crowdsourced contributions” (Penney, 2017a: 418), several of these parties’ recent actions during the 2018 Quebec election indicate a continuation of hybrid practices. Despite AGIR’s failure, QS launched a new platform called Mouvement; the PQ set up several training activities for its online activists; and the CAQ, which won its first election in 2018, invested \$1 million in Coaliste, a collaborative platform used to collect data on voters and harness online mobilization.

However, discipline and message cohesiveness were also mentioned as key objectives for each campaign. ON, QS and the PQ may have welcomed citizen-initiated campaigning, but they all paid close attention to what citizens, supporters and sympathizers were doing online for them. Hybridity never equates with being off message (Bor, 2013; Gibson, 2013; Vaccari, 2010). During the 2012 campaign in Quebec, coproduction and online mobilization were welcomed, but in a controlled manner. “Tell us you want in and we will tell you what to say and do” could have been the motto of Quebec parties who relied on Internet user mobilization. Guidance may have replaced control but not at the expense of discipline and cohesiveness. In their analysis of social media use in British politics, Jackson and Lilleker (2009) spoke of “web 1.5” campaigns, where parties gave the impression of openness and dialogue in social media even though they were actually engaging in traditional top-down, hierarchical electoral communication. Our study, with its presentation of increased levels of hybrid content use, operational management and marketing practices, seems to indicate an evolution from that model. All political parties active in the Quebec election of 2012 managed to implement somewhat open, citizen-inclusive and hybrid campaigns. The general impression our data reveal is one of political parties waging “web 1.75” campaigns, coming closer to the more fully social Web 2.0 spirit—but not being quite there yet.

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Figures

Table 1. Percentage of Mentions to Strategic Objectives in Social Media Use

	CAQ	ON	PLQ	PQ	QS	Mean
Communication	65,7	51,5	67,6	52,1	42,9	56
Political	5,7	31,1	11,1	28,9	33,8	22,1
Marketing	28,6	17,4	21,3	18,9	23,2	21,9

Source: Interviews conducted with 19 Québec strategists in the enpolitique.com project.

Table 2. Percentage of Mentions to Communication Objectives

	CAQ	ON	PLQ	PQ	QS	Mean
Broadcast messages	46	49	43	55	63	51,2
Control/Spin messages	19	12	34	19	14	21
Attack opponents	7	1	12	5	5	6,4
Promote events and tour	19	25	7	18	7	15,2
Share media content	2	13	4	1	11	6,2

Source: Interviews conducted with 19 Québec strategists in the enpolitique.com project.

Table 3. Percentage of Mentions to Political Objectives

	CAQ	ON	PLQ	PQ	QS	Mean
Generate resources	17	5	0	3	9	6,8
Promote ideology/values	0	3	8	3	10	4,8
Getting known	0	20	8	4	10	8,4
Get votes / GOTV	33	17	17	20	33	24
Mobilize online involvement	50	53	67	50	28	49,6
Mobilize offline involvement	0	2	0	20	10	6,4

Source: Interviews conducted with 19 Québec strategists in the enpolitique.com project.

Table 4. Percentage of Mentions to Marketing Objectives

	CAQ	ON	PLQ	PQ	QS	Mean
Collect voter data	23	4	22	13	13	15
Market research	17	4	22	8	15	13,2
Targeting	37	52	30	38	33	38
Relationship/community building	17	40	4	30	30	24,2
Strategy adjustment	6	0	22	11	9	9,6

Source: Interviews conducted with 19 Québec strategists in the enpolitique.com project.

Figure 1. Meme Featuring Jean-Martin Aussant, the 2012 Option Nationale Leader.



Source: Option Nationale's official 2012 campaign Tumblr account.

Figure 2. Québec Solidaire Online Campaign Mini-poster.



Source: Québec Solidaire's official 2012 campaign Facebook page.