

The Dalton Camp *Award*



2012

The Dalton Camp Award

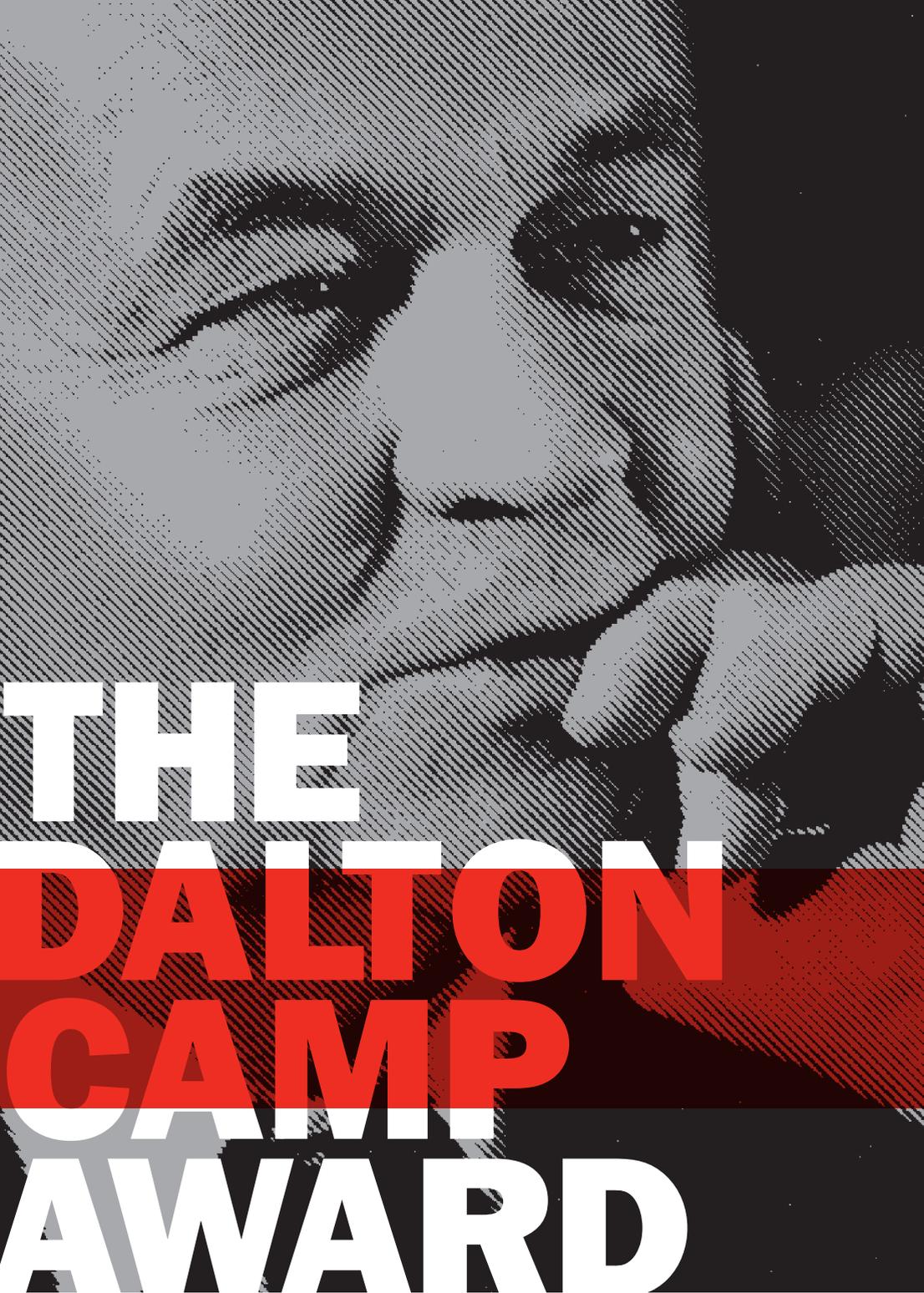
Presentation of the 2012 DALTON CAMP AWARD
Congress 2012
Canadian Federation of the Humanities
and Social Sciences

The Clay and Glass Gallery
25 Caroline Street North
Waterloo, Ontario

May 31, 2012
Presented by Friends of Canadian Broadcasting



www.friends.ca



THE DALTON CAMP AWARD

FRIENDS OF CANADIAN BROADCASTING announced the creation of The Dalton Camp Award in December, 2002 to honour the memory of the late Dalton Camp, a distinguished commentator on Canadian public affairs, who passed away earlier that year.

The Dalton Camp Award is available to one Canadian each year, the winner of an essay competition on how the media influence Canadian democracy. The Award consists of a cash prize of \$5,000 as well as a bronze cast medal by the late Canadian sculptress Dora de Pédery-Hunt. In addition up to four finalists are eligible for a cash prize of \$1,000.

Friends' goal is to encourage young Canadians to reflect and express themselves through original essays on the link between democracy and the media.

The Selection Committee is chaired by Jim Byrd; the other members are Pauline Couture and Maggie Siggins.

The winner of the 2012 Dalton Camp Award will be announced at The Clay and Glass Gallery in Waterloo on May 31. This year's winner is Regan Burles and the finalist is Mark Brister. Friends of Canadian Broadcasting is pleased to publish these essays herein and on Friends' web site: "www.friends.ca", where details on the 2013 Dalton Camp Award will be available.

Friends of Canadian Broadcasting wishes to thank the Canadian Federation of the Humanities and Social Sciences and the *Toronto Star* for their cooperation regarding the Dalton Camp Award.

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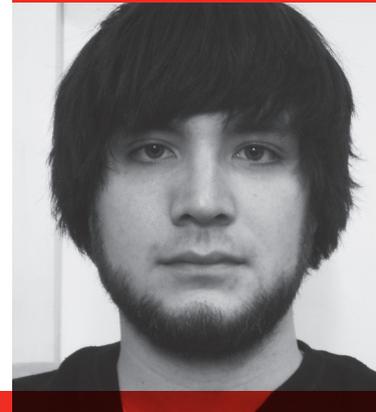
THE MEDAL

The late DORA DE PÉDÉRY-HUNT was Canada's foremost medal designer and sculptress. Among her designs are the dollar coin and a cast medal of Norman Bethune presented by Prime Minister Trudeau to Mao Tse-tung in 1973. In 2003, she was awarded the J. Sanford Saltus Award Medal, the American Numismatic Society's prestigious medal for signal achievement in the art of the medal.

THE WINNER

REGAN BURLES

completed an Honours Bachelor of Arts in Political Science and History at the University of Ottawa in 2011. He will commence a Master of Arts program in Political Science at the University of Victoria in September 2012.



THE FINALIST

MARK BRISTER

is a freelance writer and graduate student at the University of Guelph.

“Filter Bubbles”: Public Discourse in an Age of Citizen Journalism

Out with the old, in with the new

ON JULY 7TH, 2011 JOURNALIST KAI NAGATA QUIT HIS JOB AS CTV'S QUEBEC CITY BUREAU CHIEF. HIS DEPARTURE, AND THE ARTICLE IN WHICH HE EXPLAINED THE REASONS FOR IT, DREW SIGNIFICANT MEDIA ATTENTION ACROSS CANADA. THE ESSAY GARNERED OVER 100,000 VIEWS IN A MONTH, AND BY THAT TIME OVER A THOUSAND ONLINE COMMENTS HAD BEEN MADE ON THE PIECE.¹

In the essay, posted to his blog the day after he quit, Nagata details the various shortcomings he encountered at CTV, which by now are quite familiar. Essentially, the main problem he identifies is the conflict between the private interests of corporate-owned media and the public good of high-quality journalism. In his opinion, there was too much of the former, and not enough of the latter. Despite the various regulatory

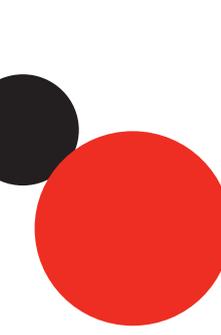
bodies that police the journalistic community, he argues, “information is a commodity, and private TV networks need to make money.”² Profits, more often than not, trump meaningful news stories.

This wouldn't be so much of a problem if it weren't for another conflict, the conflict between peoples' desire for relevant journalism and their often competing desire for entertaining, palatable news stories. As Nagata puts it, “there is an underlying tension between ‘what the people want to see’ and ‘the important stories we should be bringing to the people.’”³ Because of their primary goal of remaining profitable, news organizations will prioritize popular, if unimportant, news stories over significant, if less entertaining, journalism. These conflicts feed one another in a cycle that produces poor journalism: “people like low-nutrition TV...and that shapes the internal, self-regulated editorial culture of news.”⁴

These problems obviously do not exist only at CTV, but extend across the entire spectrum of media organizations, from newspapers to television. Nagata identifies two significant consequences of these problems, both of which compromise the role of the media as a vital organ in a healthy democratic body.

First, news organizations have no incentive to produce material that is challenging or uncomfortable to its viewers: what people like, the networks are told, are “easy stories that reinforce beliefs they already hold.” And second, there is a lack of debate and exchange of competing ideas in the public sphere: “I don't see any true debate within the media world itself, in the sense of a national, public clash of ideas.”⁵

Nagata – and a host of others – offer an alternative to the model of journalism described above. Whatever its particular name – new media, citizen journalism, crowd-sourcing – the new model tends to be sold as a panacea for the diseased hulk of traditional journalism. Whether it's crowd-sourced news sites like Digital Journal, social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, or independent bloggers, ‘citizen journalists’ are portrayed as the freer, faster answer to the problems posed by the quickly eroding monopoly that traditional media had on the flow of information. No longer needed are the organizations that set the standards for the profession and mediated its content: “what all of these experiments are pointing to,” Nagata writes, “is that it's possible to do your thing, eat well, and build your audience—completely independent of existing institutions.”⁶



BLOWING BUBBLES

Yet the rise of citizen journalism presents both an opportunity and a danger. Much ink has been spilled over the potential value of such unmediated forms of journalism and clearly they do permit experimentation that has the potential to greatly improve public discourse. However, citizen journalism is in danger of reproducing the very difficulties that exist in traditional media, and that it purports to eliminate. This point is best illustrated by a comparison with another modern phenomenon involving technology and the flow of information: filter bubbles.

The term was coined by Internet activist and author Eli Pariser to indicate the now pervasive activity of the “invisible, algorithmic editing of the web.”⁷ Google, for example, tailors its search results to individual users using fifty-seven different indicators such as their computer model, location, and browser. With these algorithms, each user receives specific search results geared to what the algorithm calculates she wants and expects. The result, Pariser explains, is filter bubbles: “your own personal, unique universe of information that you live in online.”⁸

This phenomenon is not just limited to search engines. In fact, a range of news websites have begun experimenting with personalization, including *The Huffington Post*, the *New York Times*, and *Slate*.⁹ Readers now have total control over which authors or topics reach their eyeballs – no longer any need to bother with articles or opinions they don’t care for.

The problem can be glimpsed elsewhere in the media universe too, as even traditional news providers seek to narrow their perspective in order to please a target audience. Openly partisan news outlets such as Sun TV News in Canada show that this sort of pandering to a particular set of views is becoming increasingly common. Furthermore, as independent bloggers who report on the news proliferate, it is becoming significantly easier to limit one’s engagement with the news to stories and commentary that simply reinforce previously held views.

As media becomes increasingly personalized, the very problems that afflict traditional journalism that Nagata identifies are replicated in different ways. Eli Pariser anticipates the Canadian journalist’s criticism of traditional media with his description of the consequences of filter bubbles: “the Internet is showing us what it thinks we want to see, but not necessarily what we need to see.”¹⁰ This reflects almost to the word Nagata’s concern over the profit-driven model of journalism he

experienced at CTV. Just as corporate-owned media outlets, in a bid to remain profitable, offer easy, entertaining forms of journalism, so an increasingly differentiated and personalized media landscape offers such control and variety that avoiding challenging or controversial news stories is simply a matter of choice. We can now construct our very own media echo chambers, where the only stories and opinions presented are ones that reinforce our dearly held beliefs, and even fellow readers simply parrot back to us our own sedimented perspectives.

Yet it is not just a matter of a lowering of the journalistic bar. It also means that possibilities for meaningful public discourse are severely limited. What unreserved proponents of new media often miss is that meaningful debate is about more than just self-expression; it’s more than simply yelling an opinion into the void. Rather, it requires an openness to new and opposing viewpoints and a willingness to consider novel and potentially difficult ideas – qualities that cannot be fostered in an environment designed to keep the original and the challenging at bay. Just as traditional media organizations often refrain from fostering meaningful public debate, so too do the filter bubbles induced by new media limit possibilities for genuine democratic discourse.

Nagata is excited that journalism can now take place outside of existing media institutions, and to a large degree that excitement is valid. The ways in which traditional media institutions often constrain journalists in terms of what stories they cover and how they cover them are well-documented. What institutions are able to do, however, is act as mediators for both agreement and disagreement: agreement on the basic presuppositions about society and the world that underlie – and are necessary for – almost all public discourse. And disagreement about what does – and ought to – go on within those agreed-upon parameters. The most frightening consequence of the vast multiplicity of available media that exists today is that we seem less and less capable of determining those crucial presuppositions that a society must hold in common for democratic discourse to take place.

Yet even the traditional role of institutions as crafters and guardians of agreed-upon standards appears to be eroding. In July 2011, for example, Sun Media announced that it was pulling its chain of newspapers from the Ontario Press Council, an organization that adjudicates complaints and acts as a watchdog for 191 different newspapers. The Council’s decisions, according to its website, “represent a consensus of a broad

cross-section of Ontario society and active journalists.”¹¹ Sun Media made the decision to withdraw from the group because of concerns over its “politically correct mentality.”¹² This is one small example of the way in which consensus over the foundational beliefs and assumptions that make the exchange of ideas possible is becoming more and more tenuous. This is not to say that those assumptions and beliefs that currently exist are necessarily the best ones, or that they should remain fixed. It is to say, however, that without such a foundation, any hope of a public sphere in which ideas and opinions are exchanged and considered across a broad spectrum of Canadian society is a faint one.

Admittedly, the situation may not seem so dire. Tens of millions of Canadians still rely on traditional media for their news, whether it’s on TV, in the newspaper, or online. Furthermore, our media sources have not yet become so differentiated and narrowly targeted that engagement between individuals and groups with competing views has completely broken down. But what will happen when the range of media resources available to us becomes so vast, our control over them so complete, that we lose that most basic type of consensus that renders even the most alien viewpoint comprehensible? What will happen when no stray opinions or bits of information can any longer pierce the thick film of the bubbles we’ve so carefully constructed around our media-consuming selves? As the volume of discourse increases, its comprehensibility will decrease. As our access to diverse media grows, our ability to discuss it with our fellow citizens will diminish. We’ll no longer be able to talk to one another.

POPPING THE BUBBLES

In his essay, Nagata writes that during his time at CTV “every question [he] asked, every tweet [he] posted, and even what [he] said to other journalists and friends had to go through a filter, where [his] own opinions and values were carefully strained out.”¹³ Even outside of existing institutions, though, filters abound: they are the ones we place around ourselves, aided by the ever-advancing capabilities of modern technology. If new media is to fulfill its promise, if it is to escape the constraints of traditional institutions without reproducing their failures, recognition must be given to the ways in which new forms of media are filtered to conform to our existing preferences and beliefs. Those involved in its production and reception – that is, all of us – must attempt to extricate

ourselves from these moulds, to seek out new and disquieting information and opinion, and to find among ourselves the common threads that unite our varied outlooks and unique experiences in the world. If we can do that – break the bubbles that so narrowly limit the scope of our access to media – then certainly a public discourse that is genuinely democratic will be possible.

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The Media Narcissus, Warring Gladiators, and the Carnival Mirror: National Coverage of the 2011 Federal Election

DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE CAN ONLY BE REALIZED TO THE EXTENT THAT CITIZENS ARE WILLING AND ABLE TO PARTICIPATE. ELECTIONS ARE THE MOST VISIBLE OPPORTUNITY FOR THE EXPRESSION OF COLLECTIVE WILL, AND DURING CAMPAIGNS VOTERS WILL IDEALLY CAREFULLY WEIGH THE FORCE OF ARGUMENTS ADVANCED BY OPPOSING PARTIES, CASTING THEIR BALLOT IN THE SPIRIT OF A COMMON GOOD.¹

Election campaigns must also serve as information campaigns, clearly demarcating differences between available choices.² David Taras points out the challenges this theoretical configuration encounters in the Canadian context, lamenting that “the gap between our idealized view that the public is made up of engaged and concerned citizens and the reality of widespread ignorance and cynicism is startling.”³ Written more than a decade ago, these words haunt political dialogue in what is left of our public spheres.

We cannot possibly place the entire burden of civic enlightenment and national coalescence at the feet of the fourth estate, but a small constellation of traditional media organizations nonetheless remains the critical conduit carrying complex political messages to nescient publics.⁴ Judged by its proficiency in executing this function, national media coverage of the 2011 federal election was an utter failure. Instead of preparing Canadians, reporters bombarded us with commentary fantasizing about seat distribution permutations, scoring the exchanges of party leaders, and incessantly regurgitating a torrent of polls tracking the relative standing of parties. Media obsession with evaluating events in terms of how they may impact the potential *outcome* of the election displaced other elements of national dialogue, impoverishing our collective deliberation at a watershed moment in the country’s history. We must see renewed interest in the *process* of democratic choice through the invigoration of electors as active agents in the democratic process, lest cherished institutions perish without trial.

THE MEDIA NARCISSUS

On March 21st, amid half-hearted spring budget negotiations, a parliamentary committee judged the Conservative party to be in contempt of parliament for failing to provide approximate costing for proposed criminal justice legislation, corporate tax cuts, and the planned acquisition of the mythic F-35 fighter jets.⁵ The debilitated minority government was doomed by one fate or another, but four days later then Opposition Leader Michael Ignatieff rose to present a motion of non-confidence, asking members to agree with the committee’s unprecedented condemnation. Conservative Party leader Stephen Harper gave the first speech of the campaign outside of Rideau Hall the next day, where he reiterated an attack that was by this point well-practiced: the spectre of a Liberal-led coalition. In what would be one of the longest direct engagements with journalists Harper would permit on the campaign trail, every question posed concerned the possible cooperation of opposition parties in the event of another minority outcome.⁶ The vast majority of questions put to Ignatieff later that day further probed the coalition “monkey,”⁷ despite a press release published by the Liberal Party earlier that day dismissing the possibility in unambiguous terms.⁸ “Rhetoric on one issue dominates campaign,” blared the headline of Monday’s *Globe and Mail*, and with a remarkable lack of self-awareness,

pointed out that “the voter trying to make sense of it all might be wondering why the second day of the campaign was dominated by an issue the opposition is saying will never become a reality.”⁹

Coalition questions allow the assertion of an outcome in advance and provide a simple oppositional plane to rank parties in “a classic he-said, she-said story that is a lot less taxing than the big issues.”¹⁰ Like Narcissus, seduced by a reflection he was unable to recognize as his own, the fourth estate remained transfixed on the coalition simulacrum throughout the campaign.¹¹ The McGill Media Observatory’s digital newspaper archive survey revealed that “coalition” was the top keyword mention every week of the campaign. The point is not that questions about a possible coalition shouldn’t be asked, especially when a party’s position is ambiguous. Rather, due to a failure to interrogate politicians in the inaugural moments of the campaign about whether a government can refuse requests by parliamentarians to deliver expense estimates, the question may have been answered by default on May 2nd when the Conservatives won a majority mandate.

WARRING GLADIATORS

The English language leaders’ debate was another particularly conspicuous moment of the campaign, attracting an estimated viewership of 3.85 million.¹² Even in retrospect, competing claims from this lively two-hour exchange are difficult to evaluate: When and how were corporate tax cuts first legislated? What is the history of the New Democratic Party’s position on the gun registry issue? What did the Auditor General’s report on the G8/G20 spending reveal? Featured as part of CBC’s *The National*, the *At Issue* panel asserts itself to be the “most watched political panel,” aiming to provide insight into unfolding political events. Immediately following the debate, *At Issue* presented information of little use to voters trying to make sense of these competing claims. Panelist Allan Gregg ironically pointed out that the debate helped clarify the difference between parties on issues like “value priorities,” “tax cuts,” and “law and order,” but the panel did not discuss how these differences were clarified, instead focusing on Harper’s “steady” performance, Ignatieff being “good on the attack” but showing an “inability to clarify his position on the coalition,” and antagonistic partisan barbs more likely to disenchant than inform.¹³

A front page column in the *Globe and Mail* the following day failed to provide any substantive points of policy contrast, instead addressing the question of whether Harper’s performance was worthy of a majority victory,¹⁴ and though the front page column in the *National Post* did mention conflict on issues central to the debate, it was within a hollow framing of leader performance.¹⁵ Formal news coverage of the debate from all three major networks, much like the bulk of reporting of the Leader’s Tour, focused on the same array of inconsequential topics.¹⁶ Post-debate coverage on CTV juxtaposed sound-bites to simulate a tug of war between leaders and subsequently provided commentary that further removed the viewer from policy considerations.¹⁷ Character appraisals are important insofar as we elect representatives as trustees of the public interest. However, polling during the campaign consistently showed almost a majority of Canadians intended to vote on the basis of a party’s platform, not its leader.¹⁸ The meta-analysis of the English Leaders debate went beyond the style of substance, insisting on further malnourishing its audience with the substance of style, representing one of the more caustic missed opportunities of the campaign.¹⁹

THE CARNIVAL MIRROR

Funnelling the bewildering cacophony into a rubric of empirical order, seventy-six national polls ranking the relative standing of political parties and leaders were published during the thirty-seven day campaign period.²⁰ CTV News and *The Globe and Mail* hired Nanos Research to conduct almost daily tracking, and pollsters like EKOS President Frank Graves were featured in regular appearances on current affairs shows like CBC’s *Power and Politics*. Increasing competition among polling firms, differences in methodology, and sampling problems produced wild variations during the campaign - on at least three occasions polls conducted during overlapping periods produced a ten point spread in their estimation of Conservative support.²¹ Reporting on these results was occasionally submitted to scrutiny,²² but print and television reports routinely omitted information required to properly interpret these polls such as the chasm of difference between national and regional margins of error, giving the impression of a race where there was none.²³ Amidst the fervour to forecast the election (as if it were an inevitable weather system), seat projection sites like threehundredeight.com rose in popularity, utilizing

models later devalued by actual election results.²⁴

Through their ostensible representative function, metrics of public opinion can serve democratic purposes.²⁵ Nik Nanos, President of Nanos Research, argues that daily surveys conducted by his firm gave voters a voice by allowing them to identify the issue of greatest concern, setting a trajectory for public discussion.²⁶ Yet the overwhelming aim of polling during the election was to gauge the relative standing of parties and party leaders. “I’m totally depressed,” complained an exasperated Graves, “[public opinion firms are] trying to explain the underlying social forces that are producing political change, and the media, despite protestations to the contrary, are much more interested in the horse-race side of things.”²⁷ More than a “snapshot,” horse-race polls have become a ubiquitous electoral hermeneutic, reducing an intricate tapestry of collaborative visions into a sterile, competitive ordinal. A carnival mirror, this imagery entertains and distorts, crowding our limited repertoire of political images, warping the conception of our role in the democratic process from contemplative agents to nominal units.

EMBRACING THE DEMOCRATIC CITIZEN IN POLITICAL REPORTING

There were cases where popular programmes attempted to integrate policy comparisons (sometimes present to a greater or lesser degree in *The National’s* fifteen “Reality Checks”) containing refreshing contextualizing information, though they were often presented as afterthought.²⁸ Given the financial challenges faced by media organizations today, and the reluctance of other actors such as politicians themselves to behave in a way that facilitates democratic involvement, there is no easy antidote for the aforementioned grotesque electoral aesthetic. But we can imagine some modest steps.

The first is to regularly provide information on the previous session of Parliament and events leading up to the election during the election campaign, facilitating the placement of the moment within a historical context. One prominent political commentator covering the 2011 election was unable to recall how the government fell less than a year later.²⁹ Questioning style and variety is also important. Reporters should not bludgeon politicians with adversarial questions like “why are you ducking the question” in desperate reach for a Frost/Nixon moment of journalistic triumph.³⁰ Voters can recognize when a question has been

ducked, and even in an era of elaborate staging and performance the television medium often reveals much that is unintended. “When we ask a question, we want to get a window into the source,” argues John Sawatsky, “when you put values in your questions, it’s like putting dirt on the window. It obscures the view of the lake beyond. People shouldn’t notice the question in an interview, just like they shouldn’t notice the window. They should be looking at the lake.”³¹ This technique could distract the media Narcissus from its own allure.

Viewers can make character judgements with relative ease, but most don’t have the time to wade through a sixty-five page Conservative platform and compare details with the other two major parties. Nightly newscasts should set aside time each day during the campaign period to compare various policy planks, displacing the gladiatorial contest between party leaders. Reports can also take an instructive lesson from the live chat running parallel to the English language debate on the CBC.ca website, with commentators offering helpful responses to viewer questions.³² Tracking polls should be reported with less frequency, and all relevant methodological data should be included.³³ Instead of daily national popularity tracking, news organizations could commission “deliberative polling,” where a large representative sample of the population is informed about a subject and then questioned about their opinion.³⁴ This switches our focus from considering standings to the policy preferences. The voter we see in the mirror is no longer a twisted myrmidon, but represents an ideal to which we aspire.

The observations here are not new. I may be waiting for Godot, but to believe in democracy is to be an idealist. Democracy is not the innate consequence of establishing a series of institutions; it is sustained through the momentum of an active and informed citizenry. Media organizations must adopt a democratic ethic or falter as a crucial civic link in this geographically vast and ideationally sonorous country. Charged with defending the national public dialogue, and relatively insulated from the pressures of the private funding model, the CBC must lead the charge for a more vibrant democratic ethos. Revised along these lines, the broadcaster will have clearly restored its public purpose in a political environment increasingly hostile to its existence.

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The Dalton
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A small
drop of ink...
makes
thousands,
perhaps
millions,
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