

How I Expect Journalists to Behave During #Elxn41

by Stephen Elliott-Buckley - Monday, April 25, 2011

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The short answer is: just as they are. I think they're doing a great job, especially with the kind of contempt Harper has shown them for years.

By the way, [#Elxn41 is the Twitter hashtag for Canada's 41st general election](#). It is an exciting time as Twitter is redefining the relationships between estates. Candidates, citizens and the media are being forced to redefine their relationship with each other.

Twitter is the catalyst for this democratization of relationships away from strict one-way broadcasting. In the previous two elections it was the existence of blogs, then Facebook that allowed electrons to play an unpredictable hand in the campaigns.

The last few days has seen a number of self-reflexive tweets from mostly journalists discussing/engaging on how the current dynamic exists.

Before examining all this, let me just say a couple things:

1. Without journalists doing good work, editorialists like me would have very little to go on beyond primary source documents/spin from political actors. So thanks for your work!
2. With the demise of the CanWest management junta I have noticed a marked increase in the breadth and quality of analysis and political coverage in both the former CanWest properties and their competitors. This is no small element in what I find to be a [democratic rebirth of our nation](#).

So there are a few events that are worth exploring to illuminate Twitter's role in how politics is in flux.

One of Canada's journalistic treasures, [Terry Milewski](#) has been trying to get a straight answer from Harper on why his Vancouver South candidate got an endorsement from a man linked to the Air India bombing. The party line is that she didn't know who he was. The Twitterverse has interpreted that as that she's either lying or incompetent since the person is of some significant notoriety. [Milewski explains](#) how at a recent Conservative party rally, the crowd shouted/cheered/clapped/chanted down his attempt to ask Harper a follow-up question, one of only five Harper deigns to receive each day. [You can view video of the questioning here](#).

The analysis here is that outside of traditional media production channels [TV, radio, newspaper articles/stories] journalists are living their vocation live, in real time, in Twitter. Since the Conservative party candidates rarely show up to debates or all-candidates meetings, or take many/any questions, the journalists are left to comment on the process of the campaign. And they do it live.

I think the Conservatives realized years ago that it is better to say nothing or not show up to meetings/debates than to have the general public learn of all their policy ideas. Really, over 60% of

Canadians vote against them. Why bother thinking the majority would be in favour of their ideas.

I'm not a very good journalist. If I worked as a journalist I would consider not attending Conservative party campaign events because of the party's contempt for democracy: 5 questions each day, keeping reporters caged away behind fences, refusing to let candidates show up for debates. If the party is going to be weak on policy and undermine democratic elements of election campaigns, maybe journalists should boycott those events.

But that's not what journalists ought to do. They need to show up, even if they are going to be used, manipulated, derided, neglected and spun. They're bright people. They should be able to endure all that.

And in the event of an absence of policy to report on, the journalists can report on how the campaign is going and their experiences if they're newsworthy, which the Conservatives would still prefer instead of pushing policy.

Here's how real journalists explored these issues, instead of a boycott, focusing mostly on David Akin as the hub of conversation. For the most part, the tweets speak for themselves.

In reply to the quite reasonable suggestion that journalists protest their dismissive treatment, Akin suggests few would care. Maybe political wonks would, which is a happily increasing number.

Few would care, I'm afraid. RT [@jkoblovsky](#): there's a story on how the press has been treated through CPC campaign. Use your journo skills to protest. - [David Akin](#)

Akin on the role of questioning politicians:

I'm for free speech. Free speech includes reporters -- national, local, alternative, I don't care -- asking questions. In 06, Martin shut us down. Harper has always done so .. - [David Akin](#)

Regarding the crowd shouting down Milewski:

All the more disappointing to hear PMO staffer Plouffe egging crowd on to drown out journalists as his last job was as a CBC journalist! - [David Akin](#)

Regarding whether Harper has had any positive media coverage, Akin questions whether that should even be a premise:

Was there a reason it should have been otherwise? MT [@nspector4](#): don't think Harper has had 1 day of positive media coverage - [David Akin](#)

[When Chantal Hebert wrote](#) about how this election has seemed to be about nothing, she may have been talking about how Harper called this an unnecessary election [after all, he was fired by parliament to set it

off, so I can understand how he feels it is unnecessary] and how the Conservatives have a mostly substance-free campaign, and how the result may not end up being the status quo, but a profound shift in the balance of power in the House of Commons. Akin agreed.

Agree. Hebert: "An election that has seemed to be about nothing may result in the biggest shift in the federal tectonic plates in two decades." <http://bit.ly/heTOVn> - [David Akin](#)

This agreement does not translate into journalists withholding their services because of an empty campaign, but keenly analyzing the implications of how the campaign is rolling out: something they could not do if they boycott the campaign itself.

Maclean's Andrew Coyne empathized with the Conservative campaign's neglect of journalists turning into overt manipulation with a couple comments with that reasonable suggestion that journalists not take manipulation anymore:

@[davidakin](#) Seems to me there's a point at which gallery have to refuse to allow themselves to be used this way, isn't there? - [Andrew Coyne](#)

@[davidakin](#) I sympathize with their situation. But we're now beyond limiting qu'ns, to using media as props for applause lines. - [Andrew Coyne](#)

Akin replied with the kind of price that good journalists pay, as opposed to gutless lackeys who are preferred by slippery politicians:

@[acoyme](#) Harper PMO has used us props for applause lines for 5 yrs. Tonight was just an exceptional example. - [David Akin](#)

In a related crucible of politician-journalist-citizen relationship evolution, Akin retweeted a Ralph Goodale tweet:

RT @[RalphGoodale](#): It's troubling that Mr Layton is prep'd to compromise Cda's constitution in effort to get separatist votes for NDP - [David Akin](#)

Personally, I am tired of Conservative politicians, and now Liberal politicians, misrepresenting our constitution to undermine a party's surge. But then, spin is spin. We parse spin. And here is Akin's response to the some meta-spin critique about whether it is fine for journalists to retweet what politicians tweet:

So journos shouldn't quote pols in print/TV stories? RT @[Albertaardvark](#): . More troubling: Media RT'ing party candidates tweets. - [David Akin](#)

There is nothing troubling about journalists retweeting politicians. Journalists exist as objects of credibility. Exploring their communications to discover bias is more complicated than tracking one-off retweets. It takes concerted study over time to spot journalist bias. And accusations of bias need to be well-founded before being bandied about.

Ultimately, through all these examples of the changing nature of political discourse, I'll leave the final word to Akin on what we all truly expect, or should be expecting, from the talented journalists monitoring our democracy. In response to Andrew Coyne's suggestion that the media gallery not tolerate manipulation by the campaign,

[@acoyme](#) As frustrating as it is for the individual journo: I believe readers/viewers expect us to keep showing up ... - [David Akin](#)

And we do.

And when they take one on the chin for doing their job, we should appreciate them more.

And one way to appreciate them is to follow them in Twitter; that also helps you engage in politics more effectively. [David Akin has a list](#) of most of the best Canadian journalists in Twitter. Pay attention because as politicians are slow to figure out how to include social media in their public lives, the good journalists are figuring out how the overall relationship is changing. And they discuss how that change is happening while they live it. It's all very post-modern. Or is it post-post-modern?

And as citizens, we need to recalibrate how we relate to politicians and the media. Twitter can help, but we need to do our part.