

Making This Up As We Go Along

—Peter Menzies—

The great tension in journalism has always been between the dueling commercial needs to be first and to be accurate. In the current on-demand world, the balance has shifted decidedly to the former, which has led to bizarre situations in which well-known people are reported dead and have to issue a press statement indicating that they are not, in fact, dead.

I am uncertain as to whether the living are then asked to verify their credentials to disprove the false report that they are dead but am quite certain “the source” of the original report is never asked to verify proof of death. If that was the case, after all, the report would never have taken place because there is was never any truth to it. Worse, otherwise perfectly sane journalists and commentators quote other unsourced media as their source, somehow thinking that if they deflect the sourcing they can avoid responsibility should the “facts” prove to be false. For example, Menzies News might report “Twitter is reporting” or “online sources (likely Facebook) are reporting” that blah, blah, blah. Apparently the modern journo thinks that if he/she is merely passing along someone else’s false information (“I’m not sayin’; I’m just sayin’ Twitter’s sayin’) there is no degradation to their reputation.

Thus does journalism, when practiced in this fashion, descend into a rousingly funny Monty Python skit.

How did this happen?

The rush to be first occurs because news managers are under short-term pressure to drive as much traffic as possible to their websites and build the appeal of their products. That is so that their company can make money or, in the sad case of many—not all—newspapers (think: amnesiac dinosaurs in a frozen swamp) so that they might survive.

Being accurate was always the longer term objective. That was because people tend to associate with and consume products—in this case information—from sources that they find trustworthy. Accurate data, after all, is needed for sound business and personal decisions while actions based on inaccurate data can lead to financial harm, awkward moments at cocktails parties, and eventual social isolation. And people will definitely choose not to trust your product or consume it if they can’t trust you. If they can’t trust you, they won’t go to your site any more and you will make less money or keel over in the swamp.

In summary, the short-term and long-term objectives are inherently oppositional. Being first demands less time for proof which puts being accurate at high risk. Being accurate requires more time which puts being first at high risk.

The balance has shifted because vast millions of us are increasingly electronically addicted and need a constant digital fix to get through the day. That beast, which is noisy in its demands, must be fed constantly. But that’s obvious. The more subtle change has been that short-termism has overwhelmed long-termism in our thinking. This is exaggerated by the times. The industrial age is ending. The technology age is beginning. There is no template to follow and the future is stunningly uncertain which is corporatespeak for saying, “We are making this up as we go along and we are so scared we can’t even make spit.”

So while today used to be just one of seven days in a week, which was part of a month which was part of a year, it is now almost the only thing.

And let the devil take tomorrow.

—Ray Pennings

The boiling frog metaphor is often used to describe gradual change that occurs unnoticed. The political dirty trick stories making Canadian political headlines may prompt comments on how the frog of political ethics, not the most attractive part of any democracy, is looking very unhealthy today. Yet even if the worst allegations prove true, and by-elections or criminal charges result, it won’t change the temperature or prompt the frog to leave the pot.

The short-term political strategies are predictable. When campaigns use tactics they prefer to hide, they typically give their political masters “plausible deniability” and keep the circle of those “in the know” as small as possible. If a tactic backfires, a staffer takes the public blame. Accept the resignation, insist it was an isolated incident involving a rogue player acting alone, and try to change the political conversation quickly. Opposition politicians, of course, will link the misbehaviour as high up the political food chain as possible, and drag out the scandal. All sides profess disappointment in the decline of political culture and resolve to improve things. Sometimes they mean it.

As Chantal Hebert pointed out in her Toronto Star column on the current scandals, however, the

competitive nature of politics and the emerging technologies that make political mischief cheaper and more anonymous are proving too great a temptation. Some deserve greater blame in the cases making the news, but this is ultimately about more than a few political scallywags being caught and punished. It is a logical consequence of the cultural water in which our political frogs, like so many aspects of society, are quietly being boiled.

A few decades ago, Daniel Moynihan wrote a controversial piece in *The American Scholar* entitled “Defining Deviancy Down.” When a society abandons certain shared standards, he argued, behaviour once beyond the pale becomes more difficult to deal with as stigmas surrounding those behaviours disappear.

Two trends in particular have contributed to changing the temperature of our political waters—defining deviancy down—such that behaviours coming to light should surprise no one.

The first trend is the changing nature of political parties. Canada’s political parties have been reduced to political marketing machines, highly centralized and controlled. Checks and balances that once existed within local ridings are much less effective, giving shadowy operatives in leaders’ offices and central campaign head-

quarters greater sway. Combined with effective social media and telephone solicitation tolls that make geography less meaningful, restraint on such behaviour rests with fewer people. Since success is almost totally defined by winning and losing, why are we surprised when they use the tools available to them?

The second trend involves an even broader challenge. The goal of politics has always been to gain and maintain power. Since the beginnings of democracy, dubious means have been employed to that end. In a previous era, however, clearer and more broadly shared ethical boundaries governed such behaviour. Listening to the punditry on the current scandals, it seems obscure wording in the Elections Act is being entirely relied on to distinguish an acceptable dirty trick from action that crosses the line and makes government illegitimate. While the law clearly has a role, a functioning democracy cannot rely only on law alone to keep politics respectful. In an era where one can mouth platitudes about “high ethical standards” yet not impose moral judgements on anyone, it is inevitable that standards of behaviour will be defined down.

C.S. Lewis astutely observed regarding modern times, “We make men without chests and expect of them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honour and are shocked to find traitors in our midst. We



Michael Sona, a political staffer resigned soon after the robocall scandal came to light.

Photo source: *The National Post*

castrate and then bid the geldings to be fruitful.”

The political firestorm will likely continue for a bit as leaders allege and deny who knew what when, and as those investigating piece together whether blame can be laid. The results will be unsatisfying because we have created systems and standards that narrow the political game to disconnected assignments given to individuals. We’ve spent a generation telling such individuals that if it feels good do it, that there are no moral boundaries unless someone else is hurt. We’ve constantly reminded them that no one should be imposing their morality on others.

When we create such systems, why are we surprised by the results? The frog is cooked, after all, long before the water boils.

The Acid Erosion of Political Trust

—Peter Stockland—

Our real problem is that it’s never enough for it to be what it is, is it?

It always has to instantaneously expand from something gone wrong to yet another full-blown scrape us screeching off the ceiling national nervous breakdown.

We—at least those who still pay political attention—are in the midst of just such an eruption over the so-called robo-dialing scandal that has implicated the federal Conservatives in the practice of the black arts of something called voter suppression.

Make no mistake. The information surfaced by Elections Canada—showing that miscreants (as yet unknown) used automated dialing technology to misdirect and confuse voters in the last federal election—is a serious democratic matter. Our one genuine kick at the political can in this country

comes every four or five years when we put a ballot in a box. Innocent blood has been shed protecting that electoral sacrament.

To date, Elections Canada’s hard evidence for robo-dialing malpractice has been confined to events in Guelph, Ontario. Most Canadians, of course, couldn’t find Guelph Ontario on a wall-sized map in a well-lit room with a GPS in either hand. Indeed, unless you are one of the commuters forced to pass through the Golden Gulag around Toronto, navigating past the smoldering nightmare of modernity that is suburban Mississauga, you probably think Guelph is the sound your voice makes when you try to speak with a dry throat. Yet by the miracle of modern media, and the structural idiocy of opposition politics, Guelph now is Canada. What happened there had to have happened everywhere.

As a result, front-paged obsessed journalists and sound-byte

equipped politicos have discovered that similar robo-dialing perfidy might have occurred in 70 ridings across the country. Worse, prepare to be aghast, we are breathlessly told that as many as 31,000 complaints have aired in some forum or other about election day phone calls that might have had something to do with the outrage.

Now, as a journalist, whenever I hear the three magic words “might have occurred,” I go into instant skeptic mode. Might have occurred? Did it occur, or didn’t it? These are facts we’re dealing with, not prophetic visions or swamp gas. Again as a journalist, whenever I see a slew of stories on a sudden outpouring of mass complaints so many months after the fact, I always ask myself where all these complainants were when the dirty deed was allegedly being done.

None of which justifies dismissing or even downplaying the robo-

dialing scandal. It is a story and it is a serious story and it is something that all of us who care in any way about parliamentary democracy should be deeply concerned about. The blow dealt parliamentary democracy by what actually happened is precisely why it must not be blown out of proportion.

Yet what ho? The NDP is reportedly set to use Opposition time in the Commons today to press for a debate on increasing the powers of Elections Canada so that all telecom companies that provide campaign services to federal parties must be registered and all users verified. There must, somewhere, be a formula for calculating the ratio of expansion of political hysteria to the expansion of government bureaucracy.

What is incalculable is the inexorable acid erosion of political trust that occurs when everything that is becomes just another excuse for another round of hysterics.

Tweeted Sunday After Going to Church

—Peter Menzies—

I am a late adapter. To Twitter anyway. Slow learner 4 sure.

Can’t quite figure it out. Don’t want to say that though. Afraid will look like old fuddy-duddy. And face social exclusion. Worse, euthanized as no lngr prdctv member of society. Stream of consciousness. Know every thought that has ever. Popped into Andrew Coyne’s head. Or emerged from Kady O’Malley’s fingertips. Know what technology they like. Know they are friends. Coyne disses BlackBerry. Probably CFL football 2. All the popular kids in TO hate Canadian stuff. Afraid to mention have RIM product. And a PC. Where’s delete?

Don’t want to be 2 critical. Everyone cool likes Twitter. We can all pretend we’re Jesus. Or Mohammed. Or Moses. Or Julian

Assange. We Tweeters don’t have friends. We have followers. Wish I had more. Feel like kid who just moved into town from Rankin Inlet. Everyone on Twitter has opinions/belly buttons. Some even have facts. Maybe Rguments 2. Hard to say when U can only think in 140 characters or less.

Xclnt venue for slugging. Also get to see how famous people think. Was a little famous once myself. Now that people know. How famous people think. No one will ever be famous again.

Very democratic. Kady is in an airport someplace. Stephen Taylor had nice dinner thanks to friends. I know Kady. I know Stephen. They have many, many followers. I don’t. Makes me feel bad. Bet they don’t remember they know me. Wish I had followers. Like Jesus. Or Moses. Or Kady O’Malley.

Who probably doesn’t remember me. She doesn’t follow met. Moses never got to Promised Land. Some people think he did. No one talks about Moses. On Twitter. Guessing though, that they are religious Tweeters out there. Twitter saved democracy in Egypt. And Tunisia. Wonder how democracy is blooming. In Tunis this spring. Don’t know though. Too much information out there. Must learn how to tweet in Egyptian. So I can get. Solid information. From peeps I dunno. Have no reason 2 trust. And will never meet. Where’s delete? That sounded harsh. I’ve been 2 Tunis. Smells like jasmine. And sweat. Last slave was sold in bazaar there sometime in 1950s. Twitter is restoring democracy to Tunisia. Go Bruins. Someone just said that.

Tweeted Sunday after going to church. People will know I am righ-

teous dude. And prefer church in a Scottish accent. The way it should be. If I say. Church was invented by Scotsmen often enough. On Twitter. Everyone will believe me. Except maybe for some Catholics. Does Holy Father Tweet? Did that sound sarcastic? Where’s delete? Quick. Quick. Twitter makes me anxious. Remember being on TV once. Colleague said he hated TV. We build reputations over lifetime. TV he said could destroy them in 7 seconds. Twitter kills you faster than that. If people want 2. Someone can turn the mob on U. Then U R dead. Very democratic.

Senior journo tweet indicates absence of knowledge. That certain Prime Minister of Canada ever existed. Name sounded gross. Now they know. In the future. No one will be famous. Our ignorance is naked. Luv Twitter. Follow me.