

# Chapter 11

## Scandals and Screenshots: Social Media Elites in Canadian Politics

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As the next federal election looms, it is helpful to draw insights from some of the more unconventional political actors that have been influential in past contests. In 2015, Prime Minister Stephen Harper faced a difficult campaign for re-election (see chapter 11 of this volume for an overview of this campaign online). His opposition included traditional political and media elites, but also what this chapter calls social media elites. In the days leading up to the dropping of the writ, the online hacker collective Anonymous vowed to scandalize the Harper government. As members of Anonymous mobilized their campaign, known as #OpAnonDown, an established political blogger and indigenous critic, Robert Jago, also decided to target the Conservative Party of Canada for its lack of action on electoral reform. In other years, Jago and members of Anonymous would have been seen as largely peripheral players in the formal political arena, but in 2015 their distinct set of skills coupled with the structure of media positioned them as elite digital influencers. This chapter takes interest in these types of new political elites, who are likely to become increasingly prominent in years to come as social media continues to develop and gain more traction among all segments of Canadian society.

We consider social media elites to be non-professional experts users of digital platforms as well as partisans. They are the people filling our newsfeeds with expertly crafted stories, photos, and commentary. We qualify them as “non-professional” social media elites to distinguish them from traditional elites online who are generally recognized based on more conventional norms, such as professional status or affiliations. Whereas online elites include journalists, politicians, publicists, and corporate leaders (discussed elsewhere in this volume), social media elites remain mostly outside professional politics and are active through less formal – and sometimes illegal – channels of engagement. They may be citizen journalists, bloggers, ideologues, micro-celebrities, pranksters, or hackers. We also stress that social media elites are political without necessarily being members of political parties. As partisans, social media elites might be used by parties or their activities might help them, but they are often kept at a distance from central decision making (for a more detailed discussion, see Elmer, McKelvey and Langlois, 2012: 9-12).

Social media elites are attractive to parties because of their technological acumen and, by extension, influence online. For a country where 61% of Canadians check Facebook daily, and 51% of Canadians get their news online first, that influence is tangible (Blevis and Coletto 2017). If journalists are experts in writing articles for newspapers, social media elites excel at creating content to circulate across media platforms and ensuring content spreads to as wide an audience as possible (Jenkins, Ford and Green 2013). They are experts at crafting strategic messages with the appropriate style and genre for the social media platform (Kreiss, McGregor, and Lawrence, forthcoming). Social media elites are also skilled at leveraging content dispersion and social interaction capabilities of digital platforms. To some, their expertise makes them media manipulators, a new kind of rogue spin doctor. As social media become increasingly heterogeneous, expertise differs greatly by platform (van Dijck 2013). For example, social media elites might be experts in using Twitter to amplify messages or YouTube to make a video go viral. More often, they are well versed in multiple platforms. This expertise is difficult to come by as these media channels evolve constantly, both in terms of their structural and functional properties as well as their audience pool. A short history of social media's role in politics helps situate and understand the changing influence of its elite users.

The term social media refers to “Internet-based channels that allow users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others” (Carr and Hayes 2015: 51). The term was developed as an attempt to categorize the popularity of blogging in the early 2000s. Starting in 1998, blogs have served as important outlets for political reporting, commentary, and public debate internationally such as when the news blog Drudge Report published the first details of the Monica Lewinsky scandal in the United States. In Canada, bloggers used their online publishing expertise to bypass mainstream media and engage in journalism independently, a practice commonly known as citizen journalism. Their audiences tended to be like-minded partisans. By 2006, the Canadian blogosphere had self-organized into three blogrolls for Conservatives, Liberals, and New Democrats. These blogrolls had clear opinion leaders and were forums for sharing political information, often relating to scandals and infighting, as well as deliberation, debate, and fundraising (Koop and Jansen 2009; Hindman 2009). That year marked the point that bloggers were sufficiently prominent that they joined the ranks of political elites. Political parties began

treating bloggers as allies in their campaigns, but relations between the two actors varied. The federal Conservative Party turned to bloggers to test and seed messages, as they seemingly could say publicly what the campaign could not, and used them as a new venue for testing opposition research (Flanagan 2007: 232). Conversely, the NDP avoided enlisting or mentioning its own partisan bloggers even though their blogs actively covered the campaign. Brian Topp, then national campaign director, claimed that there wasn't much value to researching these online actors (McLean 2012: 119-122). While long-form blogging has since been eclipsed by other social media formats, the political blogger remains a paradigmatic social media elite: a mixture of citizen journalist, activist, and unofficial digital strategist working for the benefit of the party.

Social media elites adapted and expanded with the arrival of Facebook in 2004, YouTube in 2005, Twitter in 2006, Instagram in 2010, and SnapChat in 2012. Each new platform arrived amidst speculation (and often hype) that it would disrupt politics (Taras and Waddell 2012: 104; Muñoz and Towner 2017). While not as disruptive as foretold by their initial coverage, 46% of Canadians use Facebook to get their news, 17% use YouTube, and 12% use Twitter (Brin 2016). Where blogging removed gatekeepers in political reporting, these latter social media introduced new communicative affordances to be perfected by elites (Nagy and Neff, 2015). Facebook, for example, simplified political organization, allowing political movements with ad-hoc leadership structures and focused interests to spring up online (Glenn 2014; Haggart 2013; Karpf 2012). Over time, new elite users of these platforms joined bloggers as informal political operatives. Many of these elites beyond lone actors to become a new generation of networked advocacy groups (Karpf 2016).

One of our cases, Robert Jago, fits into this narrative of the evolving nature of political bloggers, while our other case, Anonymous, requires us to discuss another lineage, politically motivated hacking, or hacktivism (Coleman 2015). Groups such as Anonymous, Telecomix, Wikileaks and Phineas Fisher, as well as whistleblowers such as Edward Snowden and Chelsea Manning, have used their technical prowess to obtain and release confidential information to tremendous effect. Though the relationship can be tense, individual hackers and hacktivist groups have, on occasion, partnered with mainstream media outlets to leak valuable information. These collaborations have been seen as a new mixture of investigative journalism and political activism impacting media and political processes (Beyer 2014; Brevini, Hintz, and McCurdy 2013; Lynch 2010). Beyond leaking, hacktivist groups and individual hackers have also engaged

in a wide range of digital actions with political intent (Sauter 2014; Wray 1998). In Canada, these actions have included lone hacks, such as road signs being reprogrammed to display anti-government messages (Rosencrance 2006), coordinated attacks shutting down government websites as a form of protest (McGuire 2014), and sophisticated attacks, such as when hackers hijacked the Conservative party website to spread a fake news story that Prime Minister Harper had choked on a hash brown (Taber 2011).

For all the attention to social media, there is a significant gap in the scholarly literature on the nature and influence of social media elites in the Canadian political landscape. In what follows, we consider different theory to possibly measure the influence of these elites. A big test for social media elites is whether they can affect voting or not. Changing voters' attitudes and behaviour is perhaps the strongest measure of political influence (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Social media and other digital media outlets have not been seen to have a major effect on political participation in Canada, in contrast to an international review that determined that social media had a net positive impact (Boulianne 2015; Small et al. 2014). The lack of impact does not imply a lack of effort. Social media elites actively support and campaign for parties, as seen in the highly partisan nature of the Canadian blogosphere. Digital advocacy groups have also been active in extending the tradition of strategic voting in Canada (Leadnow 2015). Preliminary results that Leadnow's 2015 campaign had a marginal impact on their targeted ridings, but perhaps might have contributed to an increased youth turnout. Social media and other digital media outlets have not been seen to have a major effect on political participation in Canada, in contrast to an international review that determined that social media had a net positive impact (Boulianne 2015; Small et al. 2014).

Beyond voting, online influence can be measured through effects on the political information cycle. Chadwick (2013) introduces that term to replace the more conventional traditional news cycle (see also chapter 11 in this volume for a discussion of this term). Political information cycles include traditional broadcasters and newspapers interacting and adapting to social media alongside new entrants made possible by emerging platforms. This dynamic is ultimately reshaping the power structure in the media environment and the ways in which news are constructed and circulated, especially in a political context. As much as the cycle might have changed, traditional elites like newspaper journalists endure alongside social media elites, creating what Chadwick calls a hybrid media system. The success of elites new and old can be

evaluated through their ability to “prime” news reception, increase the accessibility of certain stories, and to set the agenda of the information cycle (Cacciatore, Scheufele and Iyengar 2016). Priming refers to how “news content suggests to news audiences that they ought to use specific issues as benchmarks for evaluating the performance of leaders and governments” (Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007: 11) while agenda setting can be defined as the way in which elites influence the accessibility of information. Since online audiences tend to select and rely on information sources corresponding to their beliefs (Bennett and Iyengar 2008; Bennett and Manheim 2006), social media elites increase the accessibility of information by passing on, commenting on, or echoing certain stories to their sympathetic followers. Individual social media elite’s ability to amplify certain stories has been compared to traditional gate-keeping and collaborations between elites to highlight stories have been called collaborative gate-watching, or networked gate-keeping (Barzilai-Nahon 2008; Bruns 2005). Often in tandem with these agenda-setting and gatekeeping practices, social media elites prime their followers in favour of specific perceptions and interpretations of news, actions, or events by adding comments or opinions when linking to stories. There is a healthy debate about social media elites influence on the political information cycle (especially after the alleged “meme magic” of the alt-right in the 2016 US Presidential Election). Worries about elite manipulation of information cycles appear out of sync with the ‘limited’ effects tradition in communication studies. Measured studies of media manipulation and computational propaganda demonstrate that social media elites do influence information salience and propagation but not enough to usher in a new paradigm of direct effects (Marwick and Lewis, 2017; Woolley and Howard, 2016).

Social media elites also play an important role in mobilizing more conventional forms of political action, including offline protests, petitions, boycotts, and letter-writing campaigns (Earl and Kimport 2011). For some time they have helped campaigns and movements to raise awareness and funds as well as mobilize and cultivate support around important issues. In large part, the success of political mobilization depends on social media elites’ capacity for connective action, which refers to the logic at work in building and sustaining decentralized socio-political networks (Bennett and Segerberg 2013). Fundraising and protests might then be seen as the outcomes of sustained connective action to create networks capable of mass mobilization.

Connective action also provides a mode to interpret the often emotional activity on social media. These platforms, particularly Twitter, foster what Zizi Papacharissi describes as

networked structures of feeling, which, in contrast to rational evaluations of online activity, “can drive powerful disruption, help accumulate intensity and tension, or simply sustain infinite loops of activity and inactivity” (2015: 29). Social media content often promotes the kinds of shared feelings that strengthen network ties, generating “affective publics” that support other forms of political mobilization. These different measures of influence provide a way for us to deduce how social media elites attempt to influence elections.

## **Case Study**

In order to study social media elites’ influence in Canada, we chose a period of heightened activity: the 2015 Canadian federal election. Two actors during the election caught our eye as indicative of the recent evolution of social media elites in the Canadian political landscape: the blogger Robert Jago and OpAnonDown, which is a part of the global hacktivist movement Anonymous. At first glance, both these cases resembled citizen journalism in their overall online activities. They created their own news content about un- or underreported stories, amplified their stories on social media, and tried to push them into the mainstream political information cycle.

Robert Jago describes himself as a former member of the Conservative Party. He is a long-standing participant in the Canadian political blogosphere and has become a staple of the Canadian media space. His blog, named *Some Random Political Blog*, has been active since 2008, and his posts were highly cited by bloggers during the federal election that year (CBC News 2008). He joined Twitter in August 2008 and remained an infrequent user up until the 2015 election. From 2008 to 2014, he averaged twelve tweets a month. In contrast, he was much more active during the 2015 election campaign, tweeting sixty-one times in August, 317 in September, and thirty-five times in October. Even if the increase in the volume of tweeting is not extraordinary, Jago’s influence on the campaign was noteworthy, as will be discussed later in this chapter.

Our other case, Anonymous, has been active in the Canadian political landscape since at least 2008 and, in some cases, impacted dynamics of policy making and governing. In 2011, Anonymous played a pivotal role in the reopening the investigation into the events that led to the death of Rehtaeh Parsons by the Halifax police department (Nova Scotia). By threatening to

release the names of the individuals responsible for cyberbullying Parsons, they forced the municipal police to pursue the investigation and ultimately lay charges (CBC 2015). More recently, OpAnonDown - a sub-group of Anonymous likely including a few different people sharing the same account (this cannot be verified independently) - emerged online in protest of the RCMP shooting of James Daniel McIntyre in Dawson Creek, British Columbia, on 17 July, 2016. That day, Anonymous-associated Twitter account @YourAnonNews described McIntyre as a comrade and called for justice (CBC News 2015). They threatened a mix of offline protests and online cyber-protests against the RCMP (Chase, 2015). Soon thereafter, they released uncensored copies of Treasury Board of Canada documents under the hashtag #CCLeaks. Just before the writ dropped, OpAnonDown promised to target Conservative and Liberal candidates as part of their ongoing campaign against government surveillance and to bring attention to McIntyre's death. The federal election resulted in an intensification of their activities on Twitter. They tweeted 150 times in July, 309 times in August, 597 times in September, and eighty-four times in October.

### *Method*

The study takes an in-depth look at the online activities of Robert Jago (username @rjjago on Twitter) and OpAnonDown (username @OpAnonDown on Twitter) during the 2015 federal election campaign. Since both used Twitter, we focused on that platform as their main record of activity. Specifically, we collected tweets because they acted as a clearing house for Jago's and Anonymous's other activities online like blog posts and YouTube videos. We archived 972 tweets from OpAnonDown's public feed and 399 tweets from Jago's feed that were posted between 2 August, 2015 and 20 October, 2015.<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, their tweets are significantly lower than the most active accounts during a similar period, as discussed in chapter 11. It should be noted that Twitter served as an important outlet for information dispersion and social interactions related to the 2015 Canadian elections. Over 770,000 election related tweets were shared on Twitter's public timeline on Election Day and Canadians tweeted more than 3.4 million times with the #elexn42 hashtag over the campaign (Bogart 2015).

A deductive approach was used to code tweets drawing on our prior definitions of political influence. We designed nine codes corresponding with different repertoires of influence. The codes are the following: (1) direct comments about parties or politicians meant to influence voter

behaviour; (2) amplification of a news story through retweeting (a form of agenda-setting); (3) original tweets or retweets functioning as a form of citizen journalism; (4) original tweets linking to news stories that include commentary meant to influence its interpretation by followers (a form of agenda-setting and priming); (5) original tweets or retweets encouraging a form of online mobilization (e.g., calls to donate, invitations to sign a petition, a call for boycott); (6) original tweets or retweets fostering networked structures of feeling through hashtags, memes, or other public interactions; (7) original tweets checking in online or general commentary about life; (8) quasi-public interactions or replies; (9) unknown, other, or unrelated tweets.<sup>2</sup> Two coders read and classified, independently and manually, each tweet in the sample for the dominant intent of influence. Tweets were analyzed chronologically so coders would be aware of their context and dynamics of interaction, if tweets served a social interaction function. Following an inter-coder reliability test at seventy-six percent (Krippendorff's Alpha: 0.68), tweets were consensus coded to remove any disagreements, an approach used in recent studies with a similar methodological approach (Humphers, Krishnamurthy, and Newbury 2013).<sup>3</sup>

In addition, we measured the influence of Jago and OpAnonDown through the analysis of a mixture of press coverage, social media indicators, and party reactions. Methods of data collection varied for each. First, we relied on Twitter's own metrics of influence, counting the number of retweets our cases received (also discussed in chapter 11). Retweets are an important measure of a user's influence as they demonstrate an ability to produce content worth sharing (Cha et al. 2010). Second, we measured press coverage by searching for stories about Robert Jago, OpAnonDown, and the candidates they mentioned in major Canadian newspapers specifically the *Canadian Press*, *Financial Post*, *The Globe and Mail*, *National Post*, *La Presse*, *The Toronto Star*, and the *Winnipeg Free Press*. Our manual review of tweets also revealed mentions of emergent and online outlets like news aggregator National Newswatch and the now-defunct political bureau of BuzzFeed Canada. When appropriate, we refer to this coverage in our discussion.<sup>4</sup>

## *Findings*

The analysis of the Twitter dataset collected for this study shows clear patterns within these social media elites' tweeting (see Table 11.1). On one hand, eighty-five percent of Robert Jago's



tweets were either related to citizen journalism (twenty-three percent of his tweets) – most of them featuring links to posts on his blog – or interactions with other Twitter users (sixty-two percent of his tweets). Many of his tweets that we deemed to serve a social interaction function involved conversations and debates with journalists and news organizations, including Holly Nicholas from *The Rebel* (9.3 percent of social interaction tweets), Kady O’Malley from *The Ottawa Citizen* (2.4 percent of his social interaction tweets), as well as National Newswatch (2.8 percent of his social interaction tweets). No other type of tweets made up more than five percent of his total activity in the Twittersverse.

**Table 11.1: Tactics of Influence in Tweets by Social Media Elites during 2015 Canadian Federal Election**

| Tactics of influence in tweets  | @rjjago          |                      | @OpAnonDown      |                      |
|---|------------------|----------------------|------------------|----------------------|
|   | Number of Tweets | Percentage of tweets | Number of Tweets | Percentage of tweets |
| Direct comments about parties or politicians meant to influence voter behaviour   | 18               | 5                    | 90               | 9                    |
| Amplification of a news story through retweeting  | 11               | 3                    | 132              | 14                   |
| Original tweets or retweets functioning as forms of citizen journalism  | 92               | 23                   | 259              | 27                   |
| Original tweets linking to news stories that include commentary meant to influence its interpretation by followers                | 3                | 1                    | 13               | 1                    |
| Original tweets or retweets encouraging a form of online mobilization   | 0                | 0                    | 24               | 2                    |
| Original tweets or retweets meant to foster networked structures of feeling through hashtags, memes, or other public interactions | 15               | 4                    | 121              | 12                   |
| Original tweets checking in online or general commentary about life   | 11               | 3                    | 33               | 3                    |
| Quasi-public interactions or replies  | 246              | 62                   | 262              | 27                   |
| Unknown, other, or unrelated tweets   | 3                | 1                    | 38               | 4                    |
| <b>Total</b>  | <b>399</b>       | <b>100%</b>          | <b>972</b>       | <b>100%</b>          |

Note: May not total 100% due to rounding.

On the other hand, OpAnonDown’s tweeting was far more diversified and had as much to do with supporting the larger Anonymous movement as influencing the election (see Table 11.1). Accordingly, fourteen percent of their tweets and retweets amplified stories and news, many of them generated by Anonymous-affiliated accounts. Also, twenty-seven percent of their tweets served a social interaction function, many of them with Anonymous accounts such as

@Anon\_GovWatchCA (ten percent of social interaction tweets) and @Anonymous (9.5 percent of social interaction tweets). Finally, OpAnonDown engaged in much more affective tweeting (twelve percent of all tweets) than Jago (four percent of all tweets), using hashtags such as #Anonymous, #VoteAnonymous, and #OpDeathEaters to potentially foster networked structures of feeling among their followers. Their inclusion in an established network helps explain why OpAnonDown received a significantly larger volume of retweets than Jago. This fact allowed them to gain access to followers and allies willing to share and amplify their messages. Therefore, the more they tweeted, the more chances they had to connect with their supporters who would be willing to share their messages.

A closer look at the data shows that references to leaks and scandals were frequent in our cases' public Twitter feeds. Both users were very active when it came to generating or promoting their own stories about embarrassing candidates' behaviour, in the case of Robert Jago, or leaking private – or classified – government information in the case of OpAnonDown. Approximately a quarter of all posts on both accounts referenced or promoted news stories, as seen in Table 1. Promotion of their stories accounts for much of their interactions, as well. For example, on OpAnonDown's busiest day (15 September), they sent forty-eight tweets coded as citizen journalism and fifty tweets coded as interactions.

Jago's tweets largely focused on opposition research against the Conservative Party's candidates. He worked on finding stories, scandalous screenshots, and inappropriate posts to embarrass the party. His stated objective was to affect vote choice, by moving “a few thousand votes in the GTA and the 905, and a few thousand votes in the Lower Mainland [around Vancouver]” (Hutchins 2015, np). This suggests a certain strategy in his research targeting, though our data shows that he maintained a relatively broad scope: he included candidates running for elections in six out of the ten provinces.

Was Jago successful in achieving his stated goal of influencing coverage of the Conservative Party? Our research found he had a receptive partner in the mainstream media (see Table 11.2). *Maclean's* magazine called him “the most dangerous blogger in Canada” as his political blog appeared as a source of influence on campaign coverage (Hutchins 2015, np). In addition, popular news aggregator National Newswatch shared ten of his posts. The CBC included four stories about his opposition research, and his stories also appeared on various online news

sources, such as BuzzFeed and Vice News. Coverage included both stories about his opposition research as well as uptake of stories first posted on his blog. These latter posts led to the most press coverage, even though *Maclean's*, CBC's *As it Happens*, and the podcast *Canadaland* published feature interviews with him. This dynamic can be explained by several factors, including his propensity to interact through Twitter with journalists and news organizations, such as National Newswatch.

**Table 11.2: Media Coverage of Social Media Elites during 2015 Canadian Federal Election**

|   | <b>@rjjago</b> | <b>@OpAnonDown</b> |
|---|----------------|--------------------|
| Retweet   | 1,358          | 6,076              |
| Press coverage about them                         | 14             | 7                  |
| Press coverage about the candidates they targeted | 31             | 1                  |
| <b>Candidate/Party reactions</b>                  | 3 candidates   | Unclear            |

Moreover, Jago's online activities adversely impacted the Conservative Party's candidate slate. As indicated in Table 2, he appears to have prompted at least three candidates to resign or be dropped by the party. Tim Dutaud, the Conservative pick for Toronto-Danforth (ON), being the most notable of the three. Jago unearthed Dutaud's YouTube videos on 4 September, 2016. These controversial videos record Dutaud sexually harassing a female customer service representative and mocking people living with mental disabilities. This discovery came only a few hours after hidden-camera footage leaked of the Conservative candidate for Scarborough-Rouge Park, Jerry Bance, urinating in a mug when on a call as a service technician. The Conservative Party dropped both candidates that same day.

Robert Jago is also credited by journalists with at least two other Conservative candidate withdrawals. He publicized the scandalous comments that Gilles Guibord, candidate for Rosemont-La-Petite-Patrie (QC), made on various websites, including in the comment section of *Le Journal de Montréal*. After Jago exposed these comments, *The Toronto Star* reported: "Guibord's exit as a Tory candidate follows the publication Thursday of screenshots of comments attributed to him regarding women, aboriginal people and religion" (Kestler-d'Amours 2015, np.). Later in the campaign, Jago targeted Blair Dale, candidate for Bonavista-Burin-Trinity (NL), finding that the candidate had made scandalous comments on race, abortion, and drug use on his Google+ account and OkCupid profile. Later, *The Toronto Star* credited Jago with Dale's

resignation. Its article states: “news that Dale was no longer contesting the riding came just hours after Jago revealed his alleged on-line postings” (Campion-Smith 2015, np.).

OpAnonDown also focused primarily on citizen journalism during the election (twenty-seven percent of all tweets) but with much less success than Jago. They had some press attention going into the election after their Treasury Board leak. Our qualitative review of OpAnonDown’s tweeting revealed they kept a playful tone in early August, making promises to leak information related to John Baird, who was Minister of Foreign Affairs from 2011 to 2015, before deciding to leak another document supposedly connected to a court case between Nathan Jacobson, an alleged Tory supporter, the Attorney General and CSIS on August 6, 2015. This leak received no mainstream press attention, but did result in a feature interview on the podcast *Canadaland*. This pattern repeated itself throughout the campaign. Subsequent attempts at citizen journalism on September 15 and September 21 failed to attract mainstream attention.

OpAnonDown developed a more antagonistic relationship with the press than Jago. Paul McLeod of BuzzFeed and Justin Ling of Vice News – then two new journalistic outlets in Canada – both criticized OpAnonDown for circulating unsubstantiated claims. McLeod and OpAnonDown had a long debate on Twitter, hence his frequent mentions (5.79% of total social interaction tweets). Here, we can observe an interesting dynamic at work in the conflict between attempts by Anonymous to act as unofficial citizen journalists and the efforts of new emergent journalist outlets like BuzzFeed and Vice News to be considered legitimate. McLeod and Ling represented journalism’s evolving practices in an era of change. Comparable studies of hacktivist-press relations found that new journalist outlets like BuzzFeed “use new technologies to transform the way in which investigative work is produced and distributed,” however ultimately “they are firmly committed to traditional journalistic values and see themselves as preserving an industry at least as much as reshaping it” (Lynch 2010: 317). In other circumstances, McLeod and used their interactions with OpAnonDown to reiterate their journalistic values and to venerate their upstart organizations as important gatekeepers in the political information cycle. OpAnonDown had to pitch their stories elsewhere.

## Political Elites in Canada in the Digital Age

Scandals and screenshots proved to be a recipe for success in the 2015 election – a finding with implications for the role of social media in politics more broadly. Scandals occur “where private acts that disgrace or offend the idealized, dominant morality of a social community are made public and narrativized by the media” (Lull and Hinerman 1998: 3). Today, scandals circulate as screenshots, a photos, or other “proof” of transgression. By finding these digital objects, social media elites successfully influence the political information cycle. Their work functions as an information subsidy for a press looking for politainment and celebrity-like gossip. These stories disrupt communication strategists and interrupt the daily agenda enough to be worthwhile enough for social media elites to go to the efforts of finding these stories (cf. Marland 2016, 82-98).

The popularity of social media amongst Canadians may amplify a demand for social media elites. A public expected to be constantly updating their status might desire the convenience of scandals and pseudo-scandals. Scandals elicit an easy emotional, feelings of moral outrage, shaming, or perhaps, cynically, the inability to look away from the spectacle of “tire fires” in modern politics. They give people a chance to “participate” by sharing these emotional reactions (Jenkins, Ford and Green 2013; Nahon and Hemsley 2013). The Justin Trudeau government – which came to power in November 2015 – seemed to have learned a similar lesson. The memetic Prime Minister saturates the political information cycle with happy photos of him hugging pandas or explaining quantum theory in front of chalkboards – discrete objects meant to nourish the Liberal’s youthful brand or what Trudeau called “Sunny Ways” as people happily share them.

Scandals threaten modern political parties devoted to maintaining their brand as well as politicians who avoid controversy and debate on social media in favour of status updates (see chapter 13 in this volume) and appearing accessible (see chapter 7 in this volume). For example, Jago’s stories – nineteen by our count – created a broader narrative of a scandal-prone party, meant to tarnish the Conservative brand. Jago explained, in an interview with *Maclean’s* magazine, that he sought to expose the “norm of what is believed within the Conservative party” (Hutchins 2015: np). Certainly, his posts about racist, sexist, and off-colour comments clashed with the Conservative's branding. Social media elites raise the stakes of being online for politicians as they search for off-brand or scandalous comments and posts by politicians or political staff that could dominate a day’s political coverage. Scandalous objects change how

elites can influence representations of politics and, by extension, how the public perceives politicians and parties. As the news continues to mix with entertainment on social media in a hybrid media system, then social media elites capable of producing scandalous issue objects are likely to keep being successful. Robert Jago's stories focused on CPC candidates and seem to have factored in the resignation of at least three members of their team. None of those disgraced candidates ran in close ridings; instead, he filled the political information cycle, drawing attention away from more positive or brand-sanctioned stories beneficial to traditional political players. . OpAnonDown, by contrast, struggled to create an easy to spread object to discredit the Harper government. This dynamic illustrates the growing influence of social media elites and the possibility that a single individual with technological know-how and a knack for finding the right image can destabilize a large political operation.

Social media elites, however, compete and collaborate with other elites to set the information cycle and frame political coverage. Decisions about what is covered seem to be brokered, by elite interests, between journalists and social media elites. This phenomenon diminishes the hypothesis that social media elites are just an alternative voice in politics or master manipulators. Far from being a new source of coverage, our cases seem to repeat traditional journalism's emphasis on scandal. This pattern might not be accidental. While elite logics of Canadian journalism are beyond the scope of our chapter (see work by Chacon, Lawlor, and Giasson in this volume), social media elites accommodated mainstream media interests. Robert Jago fulfilled a demand from political journalists for this type of story, especially as the number of scandals became a story in itself. He justified his approach as a means to an end. In an interview with *Maclean's*, Jago commented: "I'm bored to tears with jerk-off candidates. People think I'm getting some joy about finding this stuff. I don't. But it's a project I'm going to finish" (Hutchins 2015, np). In other words, he claimed that he did not enjoy posting scandalous stories, however scandals tarnished his target, the Conservatives. A symbiotic relationship developed between him and the press: the press gained fresh stories while Jago used his profile to raise issues such as electoral reform and the pervasiveness of racism against indigenous peoples in Canada. OpAnonDown, by contrast, struggled to create an easy to spread object to discredit the Harper government.

The uneven uptake of stories also sheds light on the political economy and professional practices of Canadian journalism. Jago produced a few good stories for free that could be easily

transferred into content for news cycles. Conversely, Anonymous did not produce a “smoking gun,” but instead produced information that required further verification. In other words, they called for investigation into their stories, a process taking time and money – both of which are in short supply in the mainstream media during an election. OpAnonDown seemed to be more circumscribed by media expectations. As one member commented in an interview published in the *National Post*: “we know that we’ve got an audience that wants us to do certain things — especially hack and leak” (Humphreys 2015: np). Indeed, they were rewarded with coverage when they leaked documents. It should be noted that their tactics – which can be perceived as illegal – made it easy for journalists to frame their activity as a threat to security rather than the work of citizen journalists concerned about government surveillance.

Finally, the ephemeral nature of both OpAnonDown and Robert Jago raise questions about whether social media elites represent a crisis of public accountability or a mechanism to ensure it. Both of the social media elites studied in this chapter mobilized in response to their political beliefs and drew on their different levels of technical sophistication. They also believed in the system, hoping to influence rather than undermine the election. Canada has no guarantee that the next generation of social media elites will leverage these talents with such public interest (cf. Forelle et al. 2015). Without assuming that the future of Canada’s democracy is American, the 2016 US presidential election illustrated how social media elites may use their skills cynically to undermine democracy. Media coverage focused on the influence of “fake news” about Democratic presidential nominee Hillary Clinton (Higgins, McIntire, and Dance 2016) and social media manipulation by supposed Russian agents. Numerous reports profiled the cottage industry of former bloggers and social media elites who realized the profitability of their skills. Attempts by Facebook and Google to suppress the industry serve as a reminder that other elites, such as mainstream journalists, have to hold social media elites in check. In that way, social media elites constitute both a challenge and a solution to public accountability during and long after the campaign.

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## Notes

1 We used Tweet Dumper to extract data from Twitter: <https://gist.github.com/yanofsky/5436496>.

2 Examples of tweets from the different categories are available upon request.

3 We calculated inter-coder reliability at 76%, Krippendorff's Alpha of 0.68 (above recommended minimums of 0.67). Though discouraged by Krippendorff (2004), we consensus coded all disagreements to have complete agreement. Our disagreements often related to debates distinguishing OpAnonDown's citizen journalist tweets (code 3) from its participation in the Anonymous movement (code 1, 2 and 6). These differences in interpretation are arguably baked into Twitter with its 140-character limit and necessitate consensus coding.

4 The search patterns and databases used by the authors are available upon request.