



Porting the political campaign: The NationBuilder platform and the global flows of political technology

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Fenwick McKelvey

Concordia University, Canada

Jill Piebiak

Campaign Gears, Canada

Abstract

Political parties rely on digital technologies to manage volunteering, fundraising, fieldwork, and data collection. They also need tools to manage web, email, and social media outreach. Increasingly, new political engagement platforms integrate these tasks into one unified system. These platforms pose important questions about the flows of political practices from campaigns to platforms and vice versa as well as across campaigns globally. NationBuilder is a critical case in their study. It is a leading non-partisan platform used in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia. The case of NationBuilder in Canada analyzes how political engagement platforms coordinate the global flows of politics. Through interviews, we find reciprocal influence among developers, party activists, consultants, and the NationBuilder platform. We call this process porting. It results in NationBuilder becoming a more portable global platform in tandem with becoming an imported, hybridized part of a campaign's digital infrastructure.

Keywords

Americanization, Canada, globalization, infrastructure, Internet politics, platforms, political communication, political technology

Corresponding author:

Fenwick McKelvey, Department of Communication Studies, Concordia University, CJ 3.230, 7141 Sherbrooke St W, Montreal, QC H4B 1R6, Canada.

Email: fenwick.mckelvey@concordia.ca

Introduction

“I got a call saying we need a website ... and we need it in two days” (Groundforce, 2014, personal communication). That call initiated development on the digital side of Kathleen Wynne’s 2012 campaign to be leader of the Ontario Liberal Party. The call also began one of the first major deployments of NationBuilder in Canada. Under pressure to complete a complex technical task in a short time, the campaign’s new digital team contacted Geoff Sharpe, former president of British Columbia Young Liberals, who had just relocated to Ontario to work at one of Canada’s leading public relations firms. Sharpe suggested the campaign use a new platform called NationBuilder (Sharpe, 2014, personal communication). Normally, setting up the digital technologies needed for a campaign required cumbersome work to connect a custom website management system to a voter database or negotiations with the central party to gain access to its digital campaign tools. NationBuilder promised an on-demand, all-in-one solution: one platform to manage the campaign’s email, website, voter database, donations, volunteer coordination, and communications. A small team formed to set up the Wynne campaign using NationBuilder. As one member described the process,

I was able to just drop in the contact list, send out a blast [email] and that infrastructure was set up in two days and it was started at \$19 a month. I was like, “Wow. That is not normal.” (Groundforce, 2014, Personal communication)

Wynne would win the leadership campaign and eventually become Premier of Ontario. Political campaigns across the globe would use NationBuilder.

At a time of scholarly interest in the politics of platforms (Gillespie, 2010), NationBuilder is a platform of politics. Specifically, NationBuilder and its chief commercial competitors NGP VAN, Salesforce, and SalsaLabs are *political engagement platforms*. Evolving from historic party databases, these platforms increasingly mediate the communicative and organizational activities of campaigns (Bennett, 2015; Chadwick, 2013; Foot and Schneider, 2006; Howard, 2006; Karpf, 2012; Kreiss, 2012; Vaccari, 2010, 2013). The developers of NGP VAN (2014) summarized this trend at a product launch: “what started as just a back-end database to manage voters has truly become an engagement platform for all of your staff and volunteers” (n.p.). Much like the social media platforms that mediate user participation (Van Dijck, 2013), political engagement platforms are not “passive backgrounds” but “both facilitate and constrain particular practices and conceptions of politics” (Anderson and Kreiss, 2013: 366). They influence contemporary political communication, especially the daily operations of a political campaign.

Our interest in these platforms theoretically fits within debates about the relationship between media technologies, organization, and communication (Boczkowski and Lievrouw, 2008; Leonardi, 2012). Political engagement platforms specifically raise questions about the circulation of political practices used by political campaigns. Platforms encode practices related to political communication and organization, changing how parties collect data, contact voters, and interact online. Platforms allow these practices to circulate with some stability within and between campaigns. Anderson and

Kreiss (2013) theorized the influence of political platforms as politics made *durable*. They studied how the 2008 Obama campaign encoded its mapping practices in the NGP VAN platform. By being durable, NGP VAN circulated political practices nationally. Where Anderson and Kreiss (2013) focused on durability, media studies of platforms have questioned their configurability or programmability (Helmond, 2015; Mackenzie, 2006; McKelvey, 2011). The durability of a platform forces political campaigns to adapt, while its programmability allows it to be adapted to its local context.

As a global, non-partisan platform, NationBuilder is an important case that complements existing research on partisan political engagement platforms used by American parties (Anderson and Kreiss, 2013; Baldwin-Philippi, 2015; Karpf, 2012; Kreiss, 2012, 2016). Its parent company, NationBuilder Inc., claims that parties in 98 countries use its products. How does the platform coordinate the circulation of political practices globally? NationBuilder is also nonpartisan and has clients such as the presidential campaign of Donald Trump, British Labour Party, the US Republican State Leadership Committee, and the Ontario New Democratic Party in Canada. What organization and communicative practices are durable in a nonpartisan platform? Unlike most of its competitors, NationBuilder has a close association with the culture of Internet start-ups and venture capital. Is NationBuilder disrupting politics the same way that Silicon Valley firms have done to other industries?

To answer these questions, we have studied NationBuilder's adoption and adaptation in Canada. We interviewed political consultants, party members and developers using qualitative political communication methods and actor-network theory (ANT) (Karpf et al., 2015). We focused on two features of NationBuilder: its database, known as the Nation, and its user analytics, known as Political Capital. The Nation feature is the latest iteration in the historic process of campaign list building. Our analysis reveals how adapting Nations involves important organizational decisions for parties, such as how local ridings upload and download data from the central party. Political Capital refers to a form of analytics used to classify and score activity on and off the platform. Configuring Political Capital poses important questions to campaigns about how to rank and reward voter behaviors. We find reciprocal influence among the NationBuilder platform, its developers, and its Canadian clients. This activity hybridizes NationBuilder—following Chadwick (2013)—in two ways: as a more international product in general and as a specific, hybridized installation embedded in a campaign.

We call this overall process of reciprocal influence and hybridization *porting*. The term is borrowed from software development.¹ The *Oxford Dictionary of Computing* defines porting as “to move software from one type of computer system to another, making any necessary changes en route” (Daintith and Wright, 2008). Porting captures the relationship between local campaigns and NationBuilder's global development. Local campaigns *import* NationBuilder. Importing starts a process of feedback and interaction between developers, the platform, and the campaign that results in a custom iteration of the platform for that campaign. Feedback also helps NationBuilder Inc. improve its platform to be more *portable*, capable of adapting to different partisan and local contexts. Porting traces the global flows of politics (or scapes) as well as how political engagement platforms coordinate these flows.

Global flows of politics, objects of circulation, and political software

Our findings resonate with reappraisals of the global flows of political campaign tactics and strategies in contrast to traditional theories such as media imperialism and Americanization (Appadurai, 1990; Chadwick, 2013). In an extensive literature review, Vaccari (2013) distinguished five approaches to the circulation of flows: “imposition, imitation, modernization, diffusion or selective influence on specific layers of the campaigns” (p. 6). In agreement with others (Johnson, 2002; Negrine and Papathanassopoulos, 1996; Plasser and Plasser, 2002), Vaccari rejected any one-way processes of American influence in favor of a selective approach that attends to how the various layers of the campaign adapt foreign political practices to the local context. Selective influence results in hybridization, a process that fits within the broader theory of a hybrid media system as campaigns include political tactics from diverse international sources (Chadwick, 2013). Canada, though not part of Vaccari’s five-country analysis, fits within the selective influence approach. Lees-Marshment and Marland (2012) found that “Canadian political consultants are net importers of innovative tactics” (p. 340). Consultants select the best tactics for the Canadian context.

These flows have been studied by tracking certain objects that encode particular political repertoires and become entangled in the local campaign. A repertoire is “the organizational form and tactics of an organization” (Chadwick, 2007: 285). The choice of repertoire is important because it often has consequences for an organization’s broader goals. Campaigns, in short, select repertoires that align their political aims. Political consultants have been one of the best-studied objects circulating political repertoires (Johnson, 2002; Plasser, 2002). Political practices spread through training seminars, conferences, and trade publications as well. The American political magazine *Campaigns & Elections* briefly launched a Canadian edition and organized a 3-day seminar in Latin America to train local politicians. Professional organizations, academic programs, and initiatives to assist democracy abroad also function to circulate campaigning practices globally. Karpf (2013) described the spread of tactics among progressive groups through consultants as well as international conferences such as NetRoots Nation, Web of Change, and the Online Progressive Engagement Networks Summit.

Political engagement platforms include political repertoires as they encode solutions to the most common problems facing political campaigns (a response not unlike the technologies invented in the late 19th century to solve what Beniger (1986) and Yates (1989) identified as problems of control). Contemporary political software platforms attempt to solve the complications of information management through networked databases like NationBuilder’s Nation feature as well as analytical tools like NationBuilder’s Political Capital. Databases record voter data collected from marketing and online interactions (Delacourt, 2013), public records and the parties’ own internal records (Bennett, 2013; Hersh, 2015; Kreiss and Howard, 2010). The return to canvassing, personalized communication, and the so-called ground game means that databases are crucial to directing the flows of information from a canvas sheet to the central party (Nielsen, 2012). Political engagement platforms also simplify voter contact over social media, email, and phone as well as improving voter identification and targeting as parties attempt to be responsive to an accelerated 24/7 news cycle and constant social media

activity—what Chadwick (2013) called a political information cycle. Platforms analyze voter data and campaign interactions to create dashboards and other forms of analytics to improve a campaign's situational awareness (Couldry et al., 2016; Karpf, 2015). They facilitate a form of what Kreiss (2012) called “computational management” that allows staffers to delegate “key managerial, allocative, and design decisions to the results of rigorous and ongoing data analysis” (p. 23).

How political platforms encode politics often depends on their conditions of production. Platforms develop out of open source projects, political parties, and the work of independent contractors and political consultants. NationBuilder is part of a whole, mostly American, industry developing and selling software products for American and international campaigns across the political spectrum (Kreiss and Jasinski, 2016; Vaccari, 2010). These diverse conditions have led to a range of products with distinct partisanship that influences their features and circulation. Progressive groups like MoveOn.org and Control Shift Labs have also developed software to spread their analytics-driven form of activism to like-minded groups (Karpf, 2012, 2013, 2015). In Canada, NGP VAN, a leading political software developer for Democrats, primarily deals with the Liberal Party because of its partisan affinities (Delacourt, 2013). NationBuilder is distinct because it is a commercial, nonpartisan product available globally. This kind of commercial, nonpartisan development has not been well studied in political communication—the closest counterpart being the work of Jo Ann Yates (2005) who studied the arrival of computers in the American insurance industry. She found an “overarching pattern of reciprocal influence between technology and its use by firms and industries” (Jo Ann Yates, 2005: 269). Her conclusions inform our sense of porting NationBuilder.

These different platforms circulate globally like other political repertoires. They have been a popular import in Canada as part of a trend toward data-driven campaigning (McKelvey and Piebiak, in press). Our interviewees often cited the Obama campaign as a game-changer for politics and stressed the need to adopt better analytics, data collection, and voter engagement in their own campaigns. Obama's success, however, is not the only impetus for importing political software into Canada. The Conservative Party of Canada has historically had a strategic advantage in data-driven campaigning due to its early adoption of a unified, proprietary party database known as CIMS (Bennett, 2015; Flanagan, 2007). Privacy laws have largely suppressed a commercial voter data industry in Canada (Bennett, 2013; Kreiss and Howard, 2010), so political parties are the only institution with the regulatory flexibility to collect and maintain large voter databases. The Conservative Party presumably has been able to accumulate the most voter data, prompting other parties to try to catch up by importing software. The Liberal Party of Canada may have recently closed the gap with its adoption of the NGP VAN system in 2011 (Delacourt, 2013). NationBuilder's similarity to business management software also appeals to campaigns accustomed to employing marketing tactics in politics (Delacourt, 2013; Giasson et al., 2014; Lees-Marshment et al., 2012).

Methodology

Our research approach draws on ANT (Latour, 1992; Law, 1991) and “its methodological approach of ‘following the actors’ as they assemble the socio-technical” (Kreiss,

2012: 204 n13). In this case, we followed the actors involved in porting NationBuilder to Canadian campaigns. We selected NationBuilder after reviewing the services of Canadian consultants and the major American political technology in Canada such as Aristotle, NGP VAN, and CiviCRM (McKelvey and Piebiak, in press). NationBuilder stood out for being widely used across the political spectrum. We selected participants from the Canadian companies accredited by NationBuilder as Certified Architects or Certified Experts. Our interviews snowballed as each interviewee suggested others. Our sample grew to 17 interviewees, which included 5 of the 10 Certified NationBuilder Architects in Canada, representatives from three prominent campaigns that had used NationBuilder, five leading political consultants and political technology experts in Canada, representatives from the leading left-wing and right-wing think tanks in Canada, and two NationBuilder employees. Appendix 1 provides a complete list of interviewees. The sample thus included actors operating at different places in the campaign with varying influence. We felt confident that we reached empirical saturation as our interviewees began providing similar answers by our final interviews. Interviews were semi-structured and usually lasted an hour. We began by reviewing the participants' backgrounds, their experience in the field, and the variety of software they have used before moving to a more focused discussion of NationBuilder. The interviews concluded with a discussion of the challenges and opportunities each interviewee faced in their role (questions available upon request).

Importing NationBuilder involves tasks ranging from the mundane to the critical, from selecting the right font for the website (e.g. avoiding Papyrus) to information management and voter feedback. We have selected two of NationBuilder's most influential features for a political campaign: Nations and Political Capital. We analyze how the Nation organizes the campaign and how Political Capital communicates feedback. ANT guided our analysis of porting. Building on the application of ANT by Anderson and Kreiss (2013), we added ANT concepts from a vocabulary offered by Akrich and Latour (1992) to describe technological adoption. Traditions of mutual constitution (Yates, 2005) and transduction (Kitchin and Dodge, 2011; McKelvey, 2011) also underlie our interest in reciprocal influence and resonance. These terms allow us to speak more precisely about the flows between a NationBuilder feature, a local campaign and its developers. A *program of actions* captures the durability of NationBuilder's repertoires. When imported, programs flow from the platform and its developer. Conversely, local campaigns have their own organizational and communicative repertoires that can become an *anti-program* competing with a feature's program. Anti-programs flow back to NationBuilder's developers to make it more portable. We describe the overall process of porting—an interaction between program and anti-program—as *subscription*.

NationBuilder, a product to change the world?

Based in Los Angeles, CA, NationBuilder Inc. was founded in 2009. The company grew alongside renewed mainstream attention to computers in elections. The 2008 Barack Obama campaign crystallized enthusiasm about the Internet and personal computing to become what Kreiss (2016) called a political prototype that inspired future campaigns. NationBuilder seems to have benefited from this excitement (Fung, 2013). NationBuilder's

founder Jim Gilliam struck a nerve in the Internet community after his presentation at the major politics and technology conference Personal Democracy Forum in 2011. He called the “Internet his Religion” because of its power to bring real change in the world. Such an enthusiasm for an electronic sublime has been a long-standing part of American and, separately, Canadian culture (Barney, 2007; Carey and Quick, 1970). Internet start-ups rekindled this dream as a digital sublime (Mosco, 2004). Gilliam’s message resonated with Silicon Valley investors. NationBuilder’s first investment of US\$500,000 included support from Facebook cofounder Chris Hughes (Gilliam, 2011). Later, Andreessen Horowitz, the venture capital firm started in 2009 by Marc Andreessen of Netscape fame and Ben Horowitz of Opsware, invested US\$6.25m in part because of their shared sense of vision. Horowitz (2012) explained, “NationBuilder is that rarest of products that not only has the potential to change its market, but to change the world” (n.p.).

Such optimism translates into NationBuilder’s nonpartisanship and business model; it sells to anyone who can pay its monthly fees. Most of its competitors only sell to politically aligned parties and campaigns. The platform also has a sliding fee scale in order to be affordable for campaigns of all sizes. As Dan Walmsley (2014, personal communication), Chief Technology Officer at NationBuilder, stated, “We want to allow anyone to have access to these tools so we offer them at the lowest price that we can possibly afford. We are always trying to drive that down and drive the functionality up.” Its monthly cost varies by size of the database, number of email addresses in the database, and if customers want optional add-ons, services, or training. Basic costs (as of 23 August 2016) range from US\$29 monthly for a database of 5000 people and 1000 contactable email addresses to US\$999 monthly for a database of 505,000 people and 81,000 contactable email addresses and higher for custom solutions.

NationBuilder has attracted many Canadian customers. Interviewees cited low cost, integration, and ease of use as reasons for choosing NationBuilder over its competitors (McKelvey and Piebiak, in press). Many prominent campaigns in Canada have used the platform, including individual federal Members of Parliament who broke with the party’s infrastructure, mayoral candidates in Toronto and province-wide deployments by parties in Alberta and British Columbia. A high number of NationBuilder Certified Architects are also Canadian. In July 2014, Canadians accounted for 15% of the total 63 Certified Architects. The success of NationBuilder in Canada provides a good case to understand the circulation and adaptation of political engagement platforms.

A nation or a notion?

What is a Nation? The answer is telling. A Nation is technically the database of NationBuilder, populated with voter information as well as logs of campaign activity. However, to call this feature simply a database misses its program of action. As Dan Walmsley (2014, personal communication) explained, the word Nation should inspire customers to think, “you are not creating a people database or a CRM, and you aren’t just using a tool, you aren’t just using a system for managing data, you are creating a Nation. You are a leader of a Nation.” The term Nation tries to reframe the dull technical work of database management as inspiring. The shift, in part, encourages a campaign to think about their voters more interactively (as will be discussed later with

Political Capital), perhaps as citizens, and to think of the platform as the default medium to engage voters.

Does the Nation feature inspire Canadian campaigns? Not really. Interviewees did use the term Nation but rarely with enthusiasm. Consultants preferred the language of political or nonprofit organizing to describe their interactions on NationBuilder. Interviewees, at times, used Nation to describe the object of their organizing, but it was used interchangeably with clients, database, or list. As Joe Federer (2014, personal communication) of Campaign Central stated, "I call it CRM, they definitely don't call it that. They call it Nation building, building your Nation of supporters. To me it's a CRM."

While the Nations feature might not disrupt Canadians' approach to databases, local campaigns did have to adapt to its data collection imperatives. Nations require data, and campaigns have to collect it themselves. Canadian law circumscribes the availability of voter data. Interviewees cited a lack of political data brokers and restricted access to official records. Campaigns only receive the list of voters after an election call (Bennett, 2013; Kreiss and Howard, 2010). NationBuilder is aware of this data crunch and actively works with campaigns to teach them to "Nation build" before receiving an official voters list. As another employee at NationBuilder explained,

When we were first looking at markets like Canada we were thinking, well this is a problem because how are we going to get ... people in these Nations so that they actually grow beyond US\$19–\$29 a month because there is no voter file to load in. From a pure business perspective for NationBuilder that was a challenge. But on the other hand, it actually made the NationBuilder toolset really, really attractive to customers internationally and particularly in Canada because the lack of an ability to just get a voter file at will means that you actually have to grow your Nation yourself. (Anonymous, 2014, personal communication)

NationBuilder provides training and support to help campaigns learn how to grow their list organically. The Nation feature then includes a program of actions that requires campaigns to engage in a more constant, permanent campaign if they want to grow their supporters. This program of actions, however, is mutually beneficial. The bigger the Nation, the bigger the monthly fee. Campaigns grow their list of supporters and NationBuilder grows its revenues.

Importing Nations present important organizational choices, including most notably how distributed campaigns share data. The first versions of NationBuilder created problems for hierarchical parties. If a local riding wanted to use its central party's version of NationBuilder, it had to have access to the entire Nation. The party could not isolate a local riding from the overall activity of the Nation. In July 2012, NationBuilder changed the structure of the Nation database to create a SubNation feature. This new feature lets users "grow their parent organization while empowering chapters and local groups to branch out on their own" (Hampton, 2012). The change added a hierarchy to NationBuilder, allowing local campaigns to be a smaller, independent SubNation that could operate with some autonomy but also report data back to the overall Nation. Campaigns now have to decide whether to use the Nation or SubNation feature. The decision alters the flows of information and the permissions of different campaign staff. If a party elects to use the SubNation feature, data flows upward from the SubNation into

the central Nation but not across SubNations or down necessarily. If a campaign or party configures their installation with just one Nation, it might increase local autonomy since then smaller groups can influence the overall Nation rather than remain a restricted SubNation. Neither choice implies more autonomy, but selecting the Nation or SubNation feature changes the campaign's repertoires related to data sharing and coordination.

Local campaigns, simultaneously, influence the overall development of NationBuilder's global code base. The software's developers rely on early adopters to find what features might not be intuitive for different political contexts. Dan Walmsley (2014, personal communications) of NationBuilder explained,

Someone will sign up without us having any say in the matter and they will be like "Hey I'm in Italy and I noticed you don't support our currency" and we will be like "Oh, OK we better add it then."

Prior ports required NationBuilder's interface to support multiple languages. To date, NationBuilder runs in English, French, and Spanish. Canadian developers have helped in this internationalization by translating parts of NationBuilder to French Canada. Beyond language support, local feedback alters the data schema to be generic enough—portable enough—for any political context. Walmsley (2014, personal communication) continued,

One of our massive challenges has been how do we normalize this? How do we come up with a universal way of describing what someone's political districts are? Sometimes it's just a matter of switching on or off different databases depending on what country you are in.

Canadians occasionally notice some concepts in the data schema of the Nation database that do not work in Canada. As one consultant put it, "if you are an American political or Canadian political campaign; the product is about 95% the same" (Josh Stuart, 2013, personal communication). For the other 5%, campaigns have to customize the installation to change the names of some fields to be more intuitive for Canadian users, so, for example, "district would be riding, zip code would be postal code" (Sharpe, 2014, personal communication).

NationBuilder develops into a more portable product due to Canadian feedback. For example, consultants found that NationBuilder did not match online sign-ups to Canadian electoral districts. Canadian campaigns worked closely with NationBuilder to improve its geographic system and "provided them with all the matching information so they could go ahead and implement this into their system so they could actually pin point people down to the riding level" (Brad Oldham, 2014, personal communication). Interviewees appreciated NationBuilder's willingness to listen. As one interviewee claimed, "you can talk to them as a person and you can at least understand the shortcomings of the system, they will admit if something is not great and then you can work and find your way around that" (Groundforce, 2014, personal communication). While adding Canadian electoral districts will not attract users in other countries, learning to adapt in Canada helps NationBuilder learn to adapt quicker in other countries and their localization process improves. The second studied feature, Political Capital, further illustrates this reciprocal influence when porting.

Political capital

If the Nation is a ledger of user activity, Political Capital is its currency. A user here refers to the spectrum of actors at all levels of the campaign from staffers, volunteers, and party elites to interested voters receiving campaign emails. NationBuilder tracks user activity on the platform as well as mines public social media activity. The platform adds and subtracts Political Capital to user accounts when they do certain predefined and customized activities. “There are very few things that you can do in NationBuilder that don’t increment or decrement your Political Capital” (Walmsley, 2014, personal communication). In 2013, NationBuilder had 100 different actions enabled by default that altered Political Capital, including positive interactions like donating, sharing a campaign message on Facebook, or agreeing to be a fundraiser as well as negative interactions like violating an internal rule (Hines, 2014). NationBuilder uses Political Capital “very heavily internally,” but Walmsley (2014, personal communication) acknowledged, “some customers don’t pay any attention to it.” Though campaigns can avoid Political Capital, it is a feature hard coded into NationBuilder so it can only be hidden not disabled.

Political Capital has a program of action to increase user engagement. It helps campaigns “track supporters and prospects and move them up the ladder of engagement” (NationBuilder, 2014). Pyramids, ladders of engagement, and growth hacking are common terms in marketing and political organizing that refer to repertoires of engagement. Political Capital ranks actions by effort, seeking to increase a voter’s commitment from subscribing to an email to pledging to vote to volunteering. Political Capital, by default, does not specify steps up the ladder, but instead creates a marketplace of choice designed so users do the right actions. By the company’s own admission, Political Capital allows for the gamification of politics (Barlow, 2012). Like other forms of gamification, it creates a system of rewards designed to elicit optimal user behavior (Whitson, 2013). NationBuilder includes many ways to reward users with high Political Capital, such as websites with public Leaderboards that give some social status to active users. The company also describes Political Capital as a virtual currency (even suggesting it could be used to buy t-shirts). Interviewees considered Political Capital a way to establish thresholds of visibility such as when a voter reaches a high enough score to be a target for volunteer outreach (or hypothetically loses enough capital to be banned from the platform).

Campaigns that want to deviate from the default settings face the complex task of configuring this system of comparable rewards and analytics. Often campaigns leave the feature configured to its default settings because “there are a whole series of values in it that are OK so almost no one ever customizes them” (Josh Stuart, 2013, personal communication). To do otherwise requires the campaign to answer questions posed by NationBuilder—a prompt that Akrich and Latour (1992) called subscription. What activities to reward? How much capital? Which action is more valuable? If campaigns configure Political Capital, they attach meaning and value to certain activities. Doing so prompts campaigns to reflect on their organizational and communicative practices. Josh Stuart (2013, personal communication) explained how his firm cStreet approaches programming Political Capital:

So what we have been doing is surveying the client on the things that really matter to them and then ... basically stripping it down to zero [the scoring system], and then only allocating points to a handful of things that are really important.

Through the process described by Stuart, campaign workers in conversation with consultants reflect on and analyze their own practices to encode them within Political Capital, selecting which practices to track and their value. Configuring Political Capital—like other analytics systems—involves “how particular actors reflect upon, and adjust, their online presence and the actions that feed into it, through the use of ‘analytics’” (Couldry et al., 2016: 119). This customized system of Political Capital is an outcome of importing where campaigns reconfigure themselves as much as the software, developing greater self-awareness of their own practices.

Even when campaigns ignore Political Capital, they often subscribe to a similar program of analytics and sorting. Campaigns avoid Political Capital but use their own analytics system—what might be called their anti-program. As one interviewee discussed,

A couple times, we did a tweet-up and we tried using Political Capital to identify our most active supporters on Twitter and reach out to them, but we saw very little return. We had people who had high Political Capital, but they were journalists. (Anonymous, Olivia Chow for Mayor Campaign, 20 March 2015)

Political Capital in other words did not provide any new insights compared to the analytics already used by the campaign. These parallel activities reinforce the need to think of NationBuilder within a campaign. Campaigns ignore Political Capital while still adopting a similar program of sorting and analytics.

Imported and portable platforms

Porting NationBuilder to Canada exposes the global flows of technoscapes and ideoscapes of political platforms. We return to the three questions posed in the introduction to interpret our findings. How does the platform coordinate the circulation of political practices globally? What politics are durable in a nonpartisan platform? What organization and communicative practices are durable in a nonpartisan platform? Is NationBuilder disrupting politics?

NationBuilder as a platform coordinates the flows of politics in two ways: around a global process of software development and through local iterations within a campaign. The two meanings of the word platform correspond with the duality of porting. A platform, in one sense, is capable of being customized and reprogrammed by its users. Importing involves interplay between NationBuilder adapting to local campaigns and local campaigns adapting to NationBuilder. The platform coordinates how campaigns adapt its features. Its programmability allows for their modification as well outright rejection. We argue that NationBuilder has a “variable ontology” so that its influence depends on local adaptation (Mackenzie, 2006). This ontology means that NationBuilder’s influence is unsettled until it is adapted into a political campaign. While importing the platform, local campaigns send feedback to NationBuilder that influences its international

development. NationBuilder also functions as a platform, in its second meaning, that coordinates its development. Adrian Mackenzie, in his study of the “contemporary migrations, translocations and twists in the technoscape associated with one highly complex and polymorphous code object, the Linux kernel,” observed how Linux “co-ordinates the circulation of specific social actions” namely, its software development (Mackenzie, 2005: 77). Like Linux, the platform NationBuilder coordinates the actions of developers and users into an international development process (though it is closed-source unlike Linux).

Though nonpartisan, NationBuilder does include repertoires that influence a campaign’s organization and communications much like other political engagement platforms. The Nation feature alters how a campaign remembers and forgets its activity as well as how it circulates activity between parts of the campaign. Political Capital creates thresholds (when a voter accrues a certain amount of capital) that provoke moments of response (when a campaign reaches out to that voter). While we have focused on Nations and Political Capital, NationBuilder can also run a website, coordinate social media, and send emails. These diverse options suggest future research might collaborate with a campaign to document its importing of NationBuilder, drawing on what Couldry et al. (2016) define as a social analytics approach.

While the platform’s influence is not partisan, the programmability of NationBuilder raises concerns related to gamification and political surveillance. NationBuilder by default tracks social media and other user activity in addition to assigning Political Capital, emphasizing certain behaviors like other computational systems of meaning (Gillespie, 2014; Langlois, 2014). This casts a data shadow over user activity, enabling a form of what Howard (2006) labeled “thin citizenship,” where Political Capital stands in for other voter feedback. By default, this system encourages specific activities and highlights them to platform elites. Default settings have been problematized in software studies as the probabilistic influence of software’s configuration (Shah and Kesan, 2008). These default settings are a probable but real influence on global politics. Even if campaigns elect to reprogram Political Capital, NationBuilder coordinates these changes through a gamified system. Political Capital prescribes an economic, comparative value system schema that embeds a variable, but constant, system of social sorting in a political engagement platform (Lyon, 2003). Campaigns can ignore but never disable Political Capital.

NationBuilder appears to be more a symptom than a cause of political change globally. True to the word of its founder, NationBuilder does lower barriers of access to political engagement platforms. Smaller political campaigns, self-perceived innovators, and those isolated from the central party infrastructure can now turn to NationBuilder as a way to improve their campaign communication and organization. NationBuilder can be used anywhere with an Internet connection. Thus, NationBuilder always looms as a possible influence in any election, and concerns about NationBuilder’s default settings are global not Canadian issues.

As a technoscape, NationBuilder illustrates the importance of emerging political engagement platforms that aim to be the common medium to encode campaign activity. Platforms like NationBuilder lead to an overall hybridization of politics as campaigns select influences from the United States, Australia, and the United Kingdom based on

partisan affinities in repertoires as well as perceived technological innovations (Chadwick, 2013; Vaccari, 2013). These flows likely vary in other countries, but Canada is a first case of the international adoption of a political engagement platform.

Feedback flows from local campaigns back to NationBuilder Inc. Local installations reterritorialize the global platform. In doing so, they find problems and solutions and their work returns to NationBuilder as feedback. As a development platform, NationBuilder coordinates this feedback, deterritorializing it into a global, portable political platform. The platform's universal project might be limited to English, French, and Spanish contexts so far, but the challenge of being international will grow more complex as NationBuilder expands to other markets. What will NationBuilder become through these localizations and deterritorializations? What features will be included upstream? No matter how NationBuilder becomes more portable, its owner NationBuilder Inc. will remain in the nexus of its global flow of this technoscape. This suggests that platforms will become an important coordinator of political flows comparable to political parties or advocacy networks.

The ideoscapes that motivate the adoption of NationBuilder require more investigation as well. In Canada, NationBuilder seems caught up in a desire by all parties to engage in more data-driven campaigning. This desire might be seen as an effect of the Obama campaign as a *political prototype* where “the increasing use of data and analytics in all aspects of Democratic campaigning is not simply a question of resources, but a cultural shift towards seeing these things as organizationally important and electorally advantageous” (Kreiss, 2016: 27). Our interviewees used the Obama campaign in passing to explain their work—less an endorsement than a rationale for what needs to happen. While the Obama campaign might be exceptional, it points to a less tangible but noticeable cultural shift, where the political prototype redefines the evaluation of political practices and fosters the desire to import certain American political practices such as political engagement platforms. NationBuilder plays on these desires to sell its product. In a recent newspaper report, Michael Moschella, the Vice President of Organizing at NationBuilder, explained, “international folks would call up and they would ask, ‘How do we do what Obama does?’” (quoted in Craig, 2014: n.p.). This cultural influence is difficult to capture when focusing on the objects of circulation, so future research might explore what discourses justify importing political engagement platforms like NationBuilder.

Conclusion

Our research into porting NationBuilder contributes to the understanding of two related concepts: the influence of political engagement platforms and the global flows of political technology. Our concept of porting captures the complicated work of importing software into a local campaign as well as the production of a global political platform. Porting refers to the interactions among various actors in the campaign—the technology NationBuilder, its developers, technical consultants in Canada, and party members—that reciprocally influence one another. The Nations and Political Capital features illustrate this process of porting. In the case of the Nation database, localized use led to changes in NationBuilder's code base in order to function better internationally. Meanwhile, adapting Political Capital requires campaigns to reconfigure themselves as they reflect on and

respond to NationBuilder's prompts about campaign organization and goals. Porting results in NationBuilder increasing its global reach while being embedded in Canadian campaigns, ultimately suggesting that NationBuilder circulates internationally with some durability while also being programmable locally.

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Note

1. NationBuilder certainly fits within established patterns of technological diffusion as Canadian parties create a local market for technologies and NationBuilder is part global industry happy to supply it (Cortada, 2008), but NationBuilder also relies on a novel, global software development process.

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Author biographies

Fenwick McKelvey is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at Concordia University. He studies algorithmic media—the intensification of software within communication infrastructure.

Jill Piebiak studies digital political advocacy groups and works as a digital strategist in Toronto, Ontario. She has worked on national, state-level, and local political campaigns in North America and successfully ran Canada’s No Tax on Tampons campaign.

Appendix I

List of interviewees

Names disclosed with consent

1. Anonymous, 12 December 2013
2. Anonymous, 28 March 2014
3. Anonymous, Olivia Chow for Mayor Campaign, 20 March 2015
4. Anonymous, Groundforce Digital, 14 August 2014
5. Anonymous, NationBuilder, 7 July 2014
6. Brett Chang, Cofounder and Partner, Adrenaline, 17 July 2014
7. Ethan Clarke, Cofounder, Campaign Gears, 14 March 2014
8. Joe Federer, Founder, Campaign Central, 21 February 2014

9. Emma Gilchrist, Writer/Editor DeSmogBlog, Engagement Consultant and Former Communications Director at Dogwood, 5 March 2014
10. Hamish Marshall, Chief Research Officer at Abingdon Research; President and COO at Go New Clear Productions, 21 March 2014
11. Mike Martins, Director of the School of Practical Politics at Manning Centre for Building Democracy, 5 March 2014
12. Graham Mitchell, Director of Training and Leadership, Broadbent Institute, 18 July 2014
13. Brad Oldham, Project Manager, Popular Change, 18 June 2014
14. Geoff Sharpe, Manager, Digital at the Office of the Premier of Ontario, 17 July 2014
15. Josh Stuart, President, cStreet Campaigns, 11 December 2013
16. Dan Walmsley, Chief Technology Officer, NationBuilder, 7 March 2014
17. Mitch Wexler, Principal, Politrain Consultants, 26 March 2014