

## Book Review

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### **The Permanent Campaign: New Media, New Politics**

Elmer, G., Langlois, G., McKelvey, F. (2012) Peter Lang Publishers, 144pp

According to the authors of *The Permanent Campaign: New Media, New Politics* the term ‘permanent campaign’ refers to a ‘hyper-partisan, insider-driven political game’ [1]. This is a game in which the techniques of short-term electoral politics began to seep into the whole political cycle, and governance itself. The idea was originally framed by Patrick H Caddell, who was an advisor to the then president-elect Jimmy Carter, as a tactic to manage the emerging 24-hour media culture. Caddell’s report, the authors explain, “was among the very first to recommend bridging the tactics, time and technologies of governance and electoral campaigning” [2].

With the expansion of media into the digital realm, from broadcast to narrowcast, personal communications and most recently social media this permanent campaign has developed significantly and penetrated into the everyday lives of politicians, journalists and citizens in a way unprecedented when the idea was first mooted. In this book Greg Elmer, Ganaele Langlois and Fenwick McKelvey – working out of the Infoscape Lab For Social Media at Ryerson University, Toronto – elaborate on a number of studies they have undertaken that map these changes and try to understand just how the permanent campaign has impacted on political life. They also develop research strategies to capture and comprehend this shift of speed and scale from mass to networked media.

In that sense this is really three undertakings woven together, an impressive achievement for such a short book, but also perhaps its main weakness. The core idea of the permanent campaign tends to drift out of focus in places, as discussions of research methods and the case studies themselves come to the foreground. Firstly there is a theoretical and historical reflection on the permanent campaign itself and its relation to emergence of digital media, secondly a number of case studies that explore the ways in which the Web and social media has manifested itself in different contexts and political cultures, finally a methodological reflection on the difficulties of researching, not only politics, but any kind of social or cultural phenomena, in a web 2.0 environment. Even if each of these elements is not as integrated as they might be they all offer valuable and necessary additions to the field of Internet Studies.

The main insights offered as to the permanent campaign itself, in the first chapter ‘The Permanent Campaign: Platforms, Actors and Objects’, pertain to the mediatization that has occurred in political campaigning, and the extent to which we are now in a political culture that has become a distributed one. For example, key players in the political sphere are no longer just politicians and the professional commentariat. We now have an array of bloggers, citizen journalists and casual commentators who all have the capacity to contribute towards political debates. These new players are explored using Schmitt’s notion of the ‘mobile or motorised partisan’, that is persons who are not officially part of any party machine, but remain commonly affiliated with a party perspective.

The multiplicity of the political actors and the networked character of this mediatized political arena demands new concepts, and the authors here call on the emerging field of object oriented ontology, a growing – and it must be said contentious and by no means unified – perspective that tries to understand entities, interactions, persons and so on as forms of object. The employment of an object-oriented politics allows the authors to distinguish their approach from older transmission based models that rely on

notions of ideology and manipulation to understand political influence. Instead they argue for an arena in which multiple objects are in a constant process of interaction and assemblage, often highly orchestrated by digital code that creates dynamics and hierarchies beyond the control of politicians, publicity agents or indeed civil society.

For example, the concept of the 'issue object' is offered to capture the dynamics of campaigning in a new media ecology. This requires, for example, the creation of favourable YouTube clips that generate multiple views and comment, or 'liked' Facebook status updates and fan pages. It also includes Twitter accounts that are highly followed and "Tweets" that are widely read, commented on and re-tweeted. Once these objects are released onto the web they take on a degree of autonomy that changes the nature of political communication from the read-only broadcast era to the multiply interacting network era.

Aside from their core theses about mediatization and the consequent shift towards an object oriented politics Elmer, Langlois and McKelvey offer a number of more specific arguments associated with their empirical research, looking at, for example: Blogging; Networked publics; the embedding of issue objects in portals and platforms; the role of code; live research; networked campaigns.

In Chapter 2, 'Political Blogging and Politics Through Platforms' the focus is on blogging, a form of digital political communication that is already becoming dated by its character as precursor to a more full-blown 'social' media. The argument presented is based on two case studies primarily using a variation of link analysis on bloggers reactions to two political crises in Canada. The conclusion reached is that bloggers are more entwined in mainstream politics than may be suspected, and that while there is variation of views blogging tends to remain partisan, thus while at arms length from official part lines it is still entwined with official political communication. So we are told that "These findings demonstrate mobile partisanship at work: at times of crisis, bloggers mobilising in support of the party's stance on a given issue" [3].

In Chapter 3 'Networked Publics: The Double Articulation of Code and Politics on Facebook' the authors recognize the limitations of link analysis in gaining insights in the use of social media platforms in political campaigning. They opt for a more nuanced 'underneath the bonnet' versions of research based on the observation that in the political use of social media political actors "have to submit to, adapt to, and make use of the communicative limits and specific informational logics of social media platforms" [4]. Again, this suggests coming to terms with the technical side of the mediatization of politics, which is not simply a mediation of already existing practice, but an adaptation to the conditions of communication itself. The imperative to get beyond the user interface and access the API (application programming interface) is identified as key, especially with Facebook, given the very personalized perspectives constructed by the platform for individual users. The enables researchers to map links, processes and associations that would otherwise remain invisible; ironic given Facebook's stated ambition to map the entire social graph, a map that by design remains accessible to a very limited cohort. The authors' experimental application of their method is briefly discussed in the chapter, revealing patterns of group memberships of politicians that include their tactical joining of multiple groups, many in opposition to their opponents as well as support of their own positions. It is, as the authors claim, the "Double articulation of code and politics" [5] that creates new conditions and possibilities of political action and communication.

Chapter 4 'Google Votes Australia: Portals, Platforms, and Embeds' explores the use of video clips, via YouTube specifically, as a process of not only spreading publicity but processes of embedding and distributing a campaign throughout the web. This is a prime example of the prominence of 'issue objects' in the 'permanent campaign'. The combination of YouTube and Google as two giants producing a new network politics is the focus. This exploration is supported with an analysis of the 2008 Australian

election, in which Google pioneered a comprehensive election portal that aggregated the digital objects in circulation into an “embedded network of political information” that worked by “harnessing a distributed network of users, digital objects multiple Web platforms” [6]. This was a practice the authors refer to as “embedded decentralisation” [7], arguing that “Google’s portal also sought to mediatize the new network landscape, situating itself-principally through its YouTube property and platform at a new ‘centre’ of the web 2.0” [8]. This had the effect that for campaigns it became all about managing the distribution and circulation of media objects, in the face of much aggregation, repackaging and distribution. Different campaigns use different techniques and different platforms have different logics, but what is generally characteristic is the need to permanently negotiate a complex interacting distributed and fragmented political arena.

In Chapter 5, “Live Research: Twittering an Election Debate”, as well as reflecting on the re-mediation of an election debate on social media the authors explore the challenge of researching the time intensive and fleeting phenomenon of micro-blogging. The methodological claim is that as much as the ‘tweet as object’ has to tell us a more engaged reflexive approach is required to understand the nature of what the authors refer to as ‘interface time’. It is interface time over which political campaigns now must contend, in line with social media as “increasingly important spaces to view immediate reactions to live events from a host of online political actors” [9]. This was attempted by mapping comments in the broadcast against aggregate reactions on Twitter, the result of which was, perhaps unsurprisingly, that reactions spiked in response to controversial or shocking statements often in a “parrot like manner” [10]. But the response also included political party official Twitter accounts being used as ‘fact checkers’ to provide real time critique. The need to understand the full extent of interaction and cross platform activity is made clear in this study and leads to the last substantive chapter being largely a reflection on research methods.

Chapter 6 ‘Networked Campaigns: Traffic Tags and Cross-Platform Analysis of the Web’ makes a case for a method of social media research the authors define as the “traffic tag approach”, in recognition that “networked political communication . . . has become mutable, evasive, and much more difficult to manage in the social media universe [11]. Previous forms of network analysis that relied on link analysis or ‘HTTP methods’ no longer work with social media platforms, which are largely self-contained. Instead the authors propose focusing on tracking and tracing meta-tags, given that these are used to classify and order platforms, web sites and portals. By tracking tags it becomes possible to see how a political issue object can, and does, spread across the Web. The key is therefore gaining access to APIs, RSS feeds and other forms of back end access that sit between raw data and user interfaces, thus building maps of traffic at a more global level. This, the authors argue, is what is necessary to properly understand the “relationship between objects, users, and social media platforms” [12].

In a very brief Chapter 7 ‘Permanent Campaigning: A Mediatized Political Space and Time’, the general conclusion is offered that the permanent campaign in new media age is “an immanent space of reaction to political events” as opposed to “the programmable 24 hour news cycle” [13] and that such a form of mediatization is now the condition of politics. Elmer, Langlois and McKelvey argue that as well as being a space of intensive control for political campaigning this new landscape also offers opportunities for civil society to create its own campaigns, to influence the political sphere and ensure the permanent campaign remains a “contested plane” [14].

Overall this book offers a set of intriguing questions that are vital to beginning the task of mapping the new political landscape. A landscape increasingly shaped by invisible code and proprietorial platforms. Whatever balance of power between politics and citizens this produces, and this book suggests this remains an open question, it leaves us in no doubt that future research cannot see the mediation of

politics as merely a transparent realm for the transmission of ideas, but as the terrain into which politics is now fully embedded and by which it is conditioned. As such it is behooves the researcher to account for and render this process visible. The authors have made a good start in that task, but much work – as they themselves admit – remains to be done.

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## References

- [1] G. Elmer, G. Langlois and F. McKelvey *The Permanent Campaign: New Media, New Politics*, (2012) Peter Lang Publishers, p1.
- [2] *Ibid.*
- [3] *Ibid.*, p37.
- [4] *Ibid.*, p48.
- [5] *Ibid.*
- [6] *Ibid.*, p71.
- [7] *Ibid.*
- [8] *Ibid.*, p79.
- [9] *Ibid.*, p97.
- [10] *Ibid.*, p101.
- [11] *Ibid.*, p112.
- [12] *Ibid.*, p126.
- [13] *Ibid.*, p131.
- [14] *Ibid.*, p134.