Porting the Good Campaign: American Campaign Management Software in Canada

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Fenwick McKelvey & Jill Piebiak

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American-style attack politics threatens Canadian democracy! At least concerns over US influence permeate the latest political headlines and speeches in Canada. When the ruling, right-wing Conservative party hired a US voter contact firm for voter suppression, media framed the story as the “robo-calling scandal”. The Conservatives, however, also played on the same fears when they accused environmental groups of being fronts for American lobbyists. Environmental advocacy, they warned, undermined Canadian sovereignty. Despite these accusations, most parties and large-scale political activist groups actually rely on American political technology. The Conservative party uses MailChimp to run their mailing list. The centrist Liberal Party uses the Democratic NGP VAN to run their database, mailings and canvassing. NationBuilder has been used by all sides of the political spectrum in Canada. The difference between the worried headlines and reality suggests that American political technology is a part of Canadian campaigning, but how to understand its role? If all politics are local then how are global political technologies localized?

In this paper, we follow the actors importing and adapting American political software to Canada. We interview political consultants in Canada and software developers in the United States about their work in 'porting' political technology. We assume that software travels as
modular, semi-stabilized assemblages across the border. Their features and design have to be translated to different Canadian contexts. Our interviews asked consultants, activists and developers about their work to translate software from one context to another. How do they choose one of the many products developed by the US political software industry? How much customization needs to be done to port software designed for a US political system to Canada? Does the flow of software across the border lead to the flow of political tactics and strategies from the US to Canada?

While we did not set out with a specific technology in mind, we found ourselves part of a discussion about the NationBuilder community management system in Canada. Political consultants across the spectrum have either used or have considered using NationBuilder. We have focused our paper on this particular product use in Canada to take advantage of this opportunity and to try to be as specific as possible when discussing merging software into the campaign. In this paper, we will explore the context of Canada as well as the working involved in porting software to its local campaigns.

**Political Consultants and Global Political Communication**

Our research concerns the influence of the American political industry in Canada. Political consultants are a mainstay of American politics (Farrell, Kolodny, & Medvic, 2001; D. W. Johnson, 2001; Sabato, 1981; Thurber & Nelson, 2000; Volpe, 2010). Since at least 1934 when Upton Sinclair hired public relations professional Clem Whitaker and Leone Baxter, politicians have relied on consultants to help their campaigns (Waismel-Manor, 2011). Since then, debate continues whether consultants signal the professionalization or commercialization of politics. An entire academic field devotes itself to the link between politics and marketing (for better or
worse) (Lees-Marshment, 2001). The rise of a consumer choice and field of marketing gradually moved into political campaigning especially after Reagan and Thatcher (Lees-Marshment, 2002; Newman, 1993). Campaigns hired consultants to replicate the success of advertising campaigns. The constant elections cycles in the United States -- what Gibson & Rommele (2009) call continuous campaigning -- also attracted marketing consultants either for the money or the opportunity. Whatever the case, political consultancy has grown since the late 1950 and 1960s. While there may be debate about the commercialization of politics, there is consensus about its professionalization. “All the distinctive features of modern campaigning -- political marketing, personalization, escalating levels of technological sophistication -- share a common theme, 'professionalization'” (Scammell, 1998, p. 255). Maintaining an association is usually seen as a key part of any professionalization. The industry started the American Association of Political Consultants in 1969 and consultants now self-identify as members of a profession (Negrine, Holtz-Bacha, Papathanassopoulos & Mancini, 2007; Grossmann, 2009). Political consultancy has concentrated on “candidate and opposition research”, “polling and focus groups”, television strategy, direct mail and online communications (D. W. Johnson, 2002). Today, a political campaign can assume that it can pay to access expertise in these areas.

Increasingly, political campaigns outside the US can pay for these services as American consultants since the 1980s have been working abroad (Esser, Reinemann & Fan 2001; Lees-Marshment, Rudd, & Stromback, 2009; Negrine & Papathanassopoulos, 1996; Plasser & Plasser, 2002; Sussman, 2005). The literature differs on whether consultants created new markets (the Americanization hypothesis) given their expertise or simply benefited from the forces of modernization and globalization that created markets for their services. Johnson (2002) offers a middle-ground claiming that increasing democratization, candidate-centered elections and the
role of television mutually reinforced the prestige, technological sophistication and willingness of consultants so politics became a net export of American.

While ample literature describes the phenomenon of commercial and professional politics abroad, there is less evidence as to the circulation of consultants and their campaign techniques. Specific political consultants, such as Joe Trippi, travel abroad to lend or sell their expertise. Consultants are one of the forms of dissemination of campaign techniques that Plasser (2002) cites in an overview of global political campaigning. Campaign techniques also spread through training seminars and trade publications like when *Campaigns & Elections* organized a 3-day seminar in Latin America. The magazine continues conference organizing with its CampaignTech often attended by international politicians. The Personal Democracy Forum is another example of these moments of circulation. Professional organizations, academic programs and initiatives to assist democracy abroad also function to circulate campaigning globally. Karpf (2013b), more recently, describes the spread of tactics amongst progressive groups through consultants as well as international conferences such as NetRoots Nation, Web of Change and the Online Progressive Engagement Networks (OPEN) Summit.

Consultants, their training programs and their publications circulate as modules between campaigns internationally. Modular refers to “capable of being transplanted, with varying degrees of self-consciousness to a great variety of social terrains, to merge and be merged with a correspondingly wide variety of political and ideological constellations” (B. Anderson, 1991, p. 4). The political consultancy industry, in part, depends on its promise of modularity. It has an expertise that can be 'transplanted' across campaigns and 'merged' into their organizations. The term has influenced political and social movement studies who follow the circulation of tactics and strategies as modules across different nations and campaigns (Beissinger, 2007; Tarrow,
but also describes the work of political consultants circulating or creating modules such as publications or training seminars.

Political software appears missing from most lists of modular objects in spite of its importance to digital political communication (Karpf, 2012; Chadwick, 2013; Elmer, Langlois, & McKelvey, 2012; Foot & Schneider, 2006; Howard, 2006; Kreiss, 2012; Vaccari, 2010, 2013). Consultants box up successful practices and tactics into a software assemblage that circulate between campaigns. These technologies make politics durable, allowing practices to circulate from campaign to campaign, from federal to municipal levels. Software are assemblages of features, practices and capabilities merging with political campaigns. This assemblage arrives in a box (or from the cloud) as a stabilized set of technologies and practices. Anderson & Kreiss (2013) use actor-network theory to analyze these objects of politics such as maps, newspapers, content management systems. They are not “passive backgrounds”, but “both facilitate and constrain particular practices and conceptions of politics” (p. 399). Software facilitate and constrain politics by making certain tactics, strategies and practices “durable.” Anderson & Kreiss study how the NGP VAN mapping software used by Obama field volunteers made “a particular form of political representation and democratic practice more durable by enfolding campaigns into their logic” (2013, p. 373). Obama's campaign practices were made more durable by coding them into software that could circulate nationally without too much distortion. A campaign in either Iowa or Illinois could use similar mapping practices as a result.

Political consultants have an important role in developing, circulating and adapting political software. Political consultants, like Aristotle International, have been selling software since the early 1980s just as the magazine Campaigns & Elections launched. Its twelfth issue even included a special section of 'Campaigns and Computers'. Technology has been a constant force
before the personal computer and long after. The Obama campaign, MoveOn.org and new analytic-driven activists such as Change.org demonstrate that software continues to be an important module of the political industry (Karpf, 2012, 2013b). Campaigns adapt innovations and practices from the past to their present operations. After the 2004 Dean campaign, for example, many of its key digital strategists started firms (such as EchoDitto and Blue State Digital) that sold its innovations to other campaigns like Obama (Kreiss, 2012). Vaccari (2010) suggests that online political technology has become a commodity. Even though Democratic and progressive campaigns have attracted much attention, there is a whole industry dedicated to developing software to sell to American and international campaigns. To the point, Rasmus Kleis Nielsen (2011) describes software as often a 'mundane technology' -- part of the routines of the campaign but rarely discussed. Political software then offers another object to study the circulation of political campaigning styles across the globe.

Our study focuses on the merger of political software into the campaign. Such a claim rejects what Fritz Plasser (2002) characterizes as a one-way direction of American convergence. Where Plasser describes two additional paths of diffusions ('West Europeanization' and a hybrid form of campaigning), we seek to focus on the work in diffusion. To date, there has been no major work on this nuanced view of circulation or diffusion. The few studies inside campaigns have not focused extensively on the technology nor on the importation of technology (McLean, 2012; Nielsen, 2012).

We have focused on Canada because it's both seen as subject to American influence, but also largely overlooked in the literature. Canada has been a popular international destination for American political consultants since it's close by and debatably shares cultural commonalities (though a major debate in Canada has been over its distinctness (Adams, 2009)). Canada political
communication studies have focused mostly so far on the flows of consultants and political marketing (Lees-Marshalment, Giasson, & Marland, 2012). Lees-Marshalment & Marland (2012) found that “Canadian political consultants are net importers of innovative tactics” (p. 340), but they did not discuss the merger of software as part of this importation. Canadian political practitioners, as we have found, actively work as mediators to political software. Though consultants travel across the border, software travels across the border without consultants. While some of the issues will be specific to Canada, this approach hopefully will interest a larger audience for its discussion of the merging of political modules. In studying these mergers, we make the strongest justification of a qualitative approach to political communication. Quantitative data certainly demonstrates that political consultants operate internationally and that political campaigns have global influences, but lack the context of merger and adaptation. Interviews and other qualitative work have an important role in describing these processes of adaptation. This should provide a better sense of diffusion and circulation and the challenges to political innovation. Politics is much more complicated than plug-and-play.

**Research Design**

Our approach draws on actor-network theory (Latour, 1992; Law, 1991) and “its methodological approach of 'following the actors' as they assemble the sociotechnical” (Kreiss, 2012, p.204 n13). The approach has been highly productive in recent qualitative political communication research. This research, we would add, is part of a larger synthesis of Science and Technology Studies with Communication Studies (Gillespie, Boczkowski, & Foot, 2014; Boczkowski & Lievrouw, 2008).

Actor-network theory regards the social as “the contingent assemblage of networks” composed
with a sense of “radical heterogeneity of both humans and non-humans” (Anderson, 2013, p. 173). Keeping with actor-network theory rejects methodological distinctions between human and non-human by treating them all as actants. We have tried to follow the flows of political actants across the border. Specifically, our research has sought to trace the flow of political software from the United States to Canada.

We reviewed the list of major American political technology -- like Aristotle, NGP VAN, NationBuilder to name a few -- to find companies or affiliated consultants operating in Canada. Companies based in Canada were gleaned from lists like NationBuilder's certified architects and certified experts. Our interviewing snowballed with one interviewee suggesting others. We had our own challenges while arranging interviews, convincing busy practitioners to spend an hour of their time talking to us and keeping the interviewees focused. Getting in, according to Nielson, is crucial, but “campaign staffers' fear of spies and double-dealers illustrates why it is not always a simple one” (2012, p. 194). Our research then has an inherent bias of being comprised of consultants willing to talk with us. We did keep a balance between right-leaning and left-leaning consultants.

We selected interviewees working with a sense of the campaign as an assemblage (C. W. Anderson, 2013; Kreiss, 2012; Nielsen, 2012), so we sought as many perspectives as possible. Nielsen describes the term as “a heterogenous collection of elements engaged in concerted action” (2012, p. 20). This heterogeneity includes “campaign organizations and the staffers working on them, various allied groups and organizations, the communities of volunteers and part-timers -- and the technologies they rely on” (p. 28). Heterogeneity then meant a more porous guideline for inclusion since we did not only want to interview party elites (Lees-Marshment & Marland, 2012), but use consultants, activists, staffers and think-tanks as windows into different
facets of the concerted action. While we might be criticized for not following the chain of command in political parties, we feel that these different perspective offer better insight into the merger of campaigns and software especially NationBuilder.

Interviews sought to describe how technology merged with the campaign. While software products might be seen to circulate as modules as discussed above, they have to be integrated into organizations that adapt its possibilities. We tried to have a sense of the technology used by the interviewee when developing questions in part to ask what features are not used. Many interviewees used NationBuilder, for example, so we posed specific questions to that product.

We conducted 11 semi-structured interviews over the phone lasting about an hour each (see Appendix 1). Questions sought, in general, to understand the work of the interviewee and their sense of the political context in Canada. We would then focus on the interviewee's role in porting the campaign with specific questions about how they adapt the technologies as well as the challenges and the opportunities they face. While these interviews offered detailed insights into political campaigning in Canada, we will discuss some limitations and next steps for the project in the conclusion.

**Findings**

**Canadians use American political technology**

*Politicians use off-the-shelf and custom tools*

We encountered a real diversity in tools in Canada through a review of provincial and federal parties. To the best of our ability, we found what software runs the party database, website and mass mailer for the five major federal parties and the major parties in all ten provinces. Few
trends emerge other than the popularity of WordPress for website content management. The New Democratic Party (social democrat) and the Conservative Party both run custom database systems, where the federal Liberals run the American NGP VAN to power its Liberalist system. Provincial parties show even more diversity. While many provincial Liberal parties use NGP VAN, provincial parties do not necessarily follow their federal counterpart and party secrecy makes it difficult to develop a complete list.

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**Data-driven campaign is a major trend in Canada**

Campaigning in Canada has become focused on using data strategically, learning lessons from American success stories from George W. Bush campaign's microtargeting to the innovations in the Obama campaign. Political consultants on all sides have looked to software to improve their campaigning through micro-targeting and data analytics. The first-past-the-post electoral system and strategic voting trend has dictated a shift in politics towards more microtargeting. Emma Gilchrist, Writer/Editor DeSmogBlog, Engagement Consultant and former Communications Director at Dogwood explains,

> elections are won in just a handful of ridings and beyond that really just a handful of polling divisions within those ridings. I wouldn't say that there is a necessarily a large scale appetite in the advocacy sector to kind of have a race to the bottom for micro-targeting. But there is definitely acknowledgement that if you want to get politicians...
attention you probably want to have a presence in those swing ridings. (E. Gilchrist, personal communication, 5 March 2014)

Political consultants that we spoke with suggested that their work seeks to introduce an element of science into campaigns - rather than running on gut instinct. Hamish Marshall, of Go New Clear Productions, a political consulting firm contends,

my career in politics has always been united around the theme of trying to inject a little bit of science in with the art. There is always going to be manipulation and people having ideas and communication is at the core of it but some numbers are helpful and sometimes numbers show that some things people do simply don't work or somethings they believe are simply not true. That has been the sort of overarching thing connecting all my time in politics is let's try to inject a little bit of math and to see how that works (H. Marshall, personal communication, 21 March 2014).

Consultants see part of their role as assisting campaigns in improving data analysis often through political technology. Realizing that by tracking data allowed campaigns to concentrate campaigns better, Mitch Wexler, principal of Politrain Consulting, developed a CRM Track and Field for this Canadian context. The product according to Wexler,

helps focus people on that information so they understand where things stand across the riding, or across the jurisdiction of the campaign; then [ask] where do they need to focus, how do they access the particular information that they need? So it's a powerful system but it's also very simple from that perspective, where it really shows you the key information right away… It is really focused on enabling them [the campaigner] not from a technology standpoint, but enabling them from a strategy standpoint… Sending
volunteers back out with paper and talking to people and it's people talking to people that helps us collect that information and ultimately win campaigns. (Wexler, personal communication, 26 March 2014)

Consultants suggest that data and software allowed campaigners to strategically choose where to spend time and resources.

Consultants seem to be developing systems of computational management. Kreiss describes computational management as “the delegation of managerial, allocative, messaging, and design decisions to the analysis of users' actions made visible in the form of data as they interacted with campaign media” (2012, p. 144). Where Kreiss (2012) focuses on this form of management in the elite areas of the Obama 2008 campaign, Karpf (2013a) notices computational management as style of campaigns in progressive organizations and circulating internationally through the consultants related to MoveOn like Ben Brandzel (Karpf, 2013b). Computational management in Canada might not be as advanced for reasons we will discuss, but Canadian political consultants share a sense that letting the 'data speak for itself'. As one interviewee explains: “Instead of sitting there and playing amateur psychiatrist just keep testing and testing and testing. That's how you improve a website and use all that data and all those tools out there” (anonymous, personal communication, 19 February 2014). Political software is closely associated with this kind of campaigning.
**NationBuilder is a multi-party phenomenon¹**

We repeatedly heard consultants discuss NationBuilder in Canada as part of their interest in more effective data-driven campaigning. Consultants on all sides of the political spectrum have been busy adapting NationBuilder -- which calls itself a Community Organizing System -- to municipal, provincial and federal campaigns. NationBuilder is a multi-feature web-based political technology designed to help campaigns in their organizing, web presence, financing and voter contact. Customers subscribe to NationBuilder for $19 per month for access to its organizing tools so they can create their own iteration or Nation.

Although non-partisan, NationBuilder has a political vision. In an interview with *Forbes*, Jim Gilliam, founder of NationBuilder, describes its grand purpose as “to bring that kind of power where everyone can connect with people who can help them accomplish great things” (quoted in Rose, 2013 np.). Part of vision includes ensuring its accessibility and ease of use as Dan Walmsley, Chief Technology Officer at NationBuilder puts it, “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” (D. Walmsley, personal communication, 7 March 2014). Its political visions drives it to be as accessible as possible for potential political campaigns.

Large-scale Canadian campaigns are using NationBuilder as their product of choice. cStreet Campaigns, certified NationBuilder architect and expert, developed a NationBuilder site for

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¹ It is important to note that NationBuilder is a multi-party phenomenon yet consultants, designers and architects hired by candidates and political advocacy groups tend to be partisan. Political consultants need to assure confidence with clients, Marshall says “Absolutely, it's a matter of trust, especially when you are working on things related to database so people need to know that they are able to trust you and our general rule of thumb is that we only work for parities we vote for” (Marshall 2014). Wexler, of Polittrain consulting has turned work down if the party might undermine the trust of the people he already works with on a regular basis “The ethics of the work that I do is important” he says (M. Wexler, personal communication, 26 March 2014).
Olivia Chow as a federal member of parliament and for her 2014 mayor Toronto mayoral bid. John Tory, once head of the Progressive Conservative Party of Ontario, deployed NationBuilder in his mayoral campaign in Toronto developed by Adrenaline Digital Public Affairs. Digital Campaign Solutions designed a site for the successful 2013 leadership campaign of Kathleen Wynne, now premier of Ontario (Scharwath, 2013), NationBuilder's popularity is not unique to Canada, it has over 4,000 customers as of September 2013 but claims to grow by 20% each month (Chakelian, 2013).

We will discuss the factors behind NationBuilder's success given its popularity in Canada. Why, given the number of options, is NationBuilder a factor in Canada?

*NationBuilder is cheap and Canadian politics is broke*

Canadian politics has less money. A limit of $1,200 applies to all individuals donating to Federal parties. Lack of funds inhibit developing systems internally and factor into the decision of selecting a political product. The short campaign period for elections, with the exclusion of municipal level elections, “makes the pool of funds much smaller than in the US” (E. Clarke, personal communication, 14 March 2014). Frequency also limits the funds available to Canadian campaigns. Where the United States has 513,200 elected public offices (S. Johnson, 2002, p. 8), Canada has 1,068 provincial and federal seats as well approximately 2,070 municipalities. These factors limit importing political technology or developing internally.

NationBuilder's price tag eases the migration North. As Josh Stuart, President of cStreet Campaigns, explains

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2 Though no exact number exists, we choose the figure listed by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities: http://www.fcm.ca/home/about-us/membership/our-members.htm
I was working at a non-profit and doing some work on and off on election campaigns in Canada and I was always made very sad by the state of the organizing tech around campaigns. Especially, for sort of small-ish organizations where you were either hacking together a WordPress site, and donations through a gross yellow PayPal button, and then volunteers on an Excel spreadsheet, and maybe you are using some sort of open source database that you can't really change because you don't have any developers; just all that stuff. Then the only other option was these really expensive US based platforms like SalsaLab or Blue State Digital that were just totally out of our price point. (J. Stuart, personal communication, 11 December 2014)

The challenge is two-fold both the lack of developers to build their own tools effectively and the lack of funds to hire one of the major US products. NationBuilder arrived at the right price point and feature set. Other developers corroborate Stuart. Mike Martins, long-time political practitioner and Director of the School of Practical Politics at Manning Centre for Building Democracy, explains that for a low price campaigns can have a cutting edge system that with one of the “best support system[s] of any database anywhere” (M. Martins, personal communication, 5 March 2014).

The price system also appeal to candidates either disconnected from the federal infrastructure or looking to innovate. Parties usually restrict access to their infrastructure to candidates, denying access to nominees. NationBuilder allows candidates to digitally manage their campaigns without its central party infrastructure. Joe Federer of Campaign Central explains,

The Conservative Party in Canada has their own, they all have their own that they've developed at great expense in house, and you have to be part of that structure to take
advantage of it and they are very, very tightly regulated. You don't get access to any of them without being a certified party member, etc, etc, etc. NationBuilder billed itself very clearly as non-partisan, available to everybody with $20.00 a month because that's what it costs to get in beyond the first two weeks. So it opens it up to individuals who want to mount a campaign for like reeve of the local township. (J. Federer, personal communication, 21 February 2014)

Some campaigns have adopted NationBuilder since it provides access to perceived cutting-edge features that might be ahead of the central party. Cost and access make NationBuilder an easy choice for many political consultants looking to improve their data-driven campaigning, but most consultants have also considered other options as well.

**Consultants have also done their research about campaigns**

NationBuilder appeals to Canadian political consultants by being cheap, accessible and an all-in-one solution. Its worth mentioning that NationBuilder -- even as our survey suggests -- is one among an industry of programs. NationBuilder then is a deliberate choice that fits the needs of a campaign looking for solutions.

Consultants evaluated NationBuilder in comparison to other products when deciding to use it. Long-time IT consultant Joe Federer of Campaign Central illustrates this comparative approach to NationBuilder. He has worked on customer relation management (CRM) databases in and out of politics for over 10 years. As his career in IT was coming to an end he met a local Liberal candidate looking for new ways of doing public outreach prompting him to find a system for the job. He found NationBuilder that to him is “a CRM and as such it's just another CRM,” but he decided it's “the leader in the field of political and social CRM” (J. Federer, personal
communication, 21 February 2014). Because of his experience, his insights demonstrate that NationBuilder is an evolution in CRM systems, but not a revolutionary new product as its promotional materials might suggest.

Consultants have adopted NationBuilder to integrate tasks that previously required separate tools. A campaign would use CiviCRM for vote data management, Drupal for a web front end and MailChimp separately for voter contact for example. NationBuilder integrated these task and their corresponding data. As Ethan Clarke of Campaign Gears puts it:

Having all of the tools together in one place and having the integration between the different tools (ie forms on the website automatically going to the database) makes things easier for the owners of the 'nation.' It reduces the amount of set up time and cost. It does reduce the amount of flexibility available to the client and often requires someone like myself to be involved in more complicated projects to help navigate the constraints created by NationBuilder. (E. Clark, 14 March 2014)

NationBuilder integrates these campaign tasks previously handled by a few tools. Different activities also feature strong analytics that pool into more holistic records of voters. NationBuilder then arrived as a solution for consultants struggling to run a campaign with a few different tools and ensure their data supported each other.

If NationBuilder appeals to political consultants, then how to they adapt it to Canada. The next section explores this question.

**Merging NationBuilder with the Campaign Assemblage**

If NationBuilder is an American software, do Canadians have to worry about American-style
campaigning heading North? No, but NationBuilder does have some campaign programs of actions built into its design. By program, we mean what Latour (1992) describes as how an actant attempts to elicit a certain response or list of actions in the actants that take it up. In NationBuilder, two key design features stand out in its program approach of campaigning: nation and political capital.

*Nation or 'Nation'*?

As Dan Walmsley of NationBuilder, explains, “our application is deliberately opinionated in certain ways as every application is. The fact that a Nation is a Nation is totally baked in from the ground up” not only for the brand name, but to inspire customers to think that “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.” It's clear in our interview and from the public talks of Jim Gilliam that NationBuilder has a political intent (Rose, 2013). The term Nation seeks to inspire its users to think beyond just a CRM to using a decidedly political language of nations and citizens to describe the same work. As Walmsley continues:

> There is something that makes you feel like you could take on other nations that are maybe literal nations. If you're an advocate for gay rights in Kenya or if you're a Tea Party'er in New York and you don't agree with what your government is doing. Well you've got your own Nation and you can rally your own citizens and you can step up and join a cause. (D. Walmsley, personal communication, 7 March 2014)

The term Nation then seeks to inspire political movements to think beyond list building to think of interaction and the role of members in making a change.
NationBuilder’s political vision seems to have been stopped at the border. Political consultants do use the term Nation, but rarely with the same gravitas of Gilliam or Walmsley. They sometimes use Nation to describe the object of their organizing, but its used interchangeably with clients, database or the list of supporters. As Federer states, “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” (personal communication, 21 February 2014). Consultants also do not link Nation with their member participation. While engagement and optimization certainly refer to modes of engaging members of a Nation, the language continues to be framed around political or non-profit organizing.

**Political capital**

Political capital is a metric that NationBuilder gauges the levels of support based on a few variables such as social media activity. It helps campaigns identify their most valuable supporters. “There are very few things that you can do in NationBuilder that don't increment or decrement your political capital” (D. Walmsley, personal communication, 7 March 2014). Even though NationBuilder encourages the use of political capital, it admits that some actors ignore it (what Latour (1992) would call an anti-program). NationBuilder uses political capital “very heavily internally,” but Walmsley acknowledges that “some customers don't pay any attention to it” (personal communication, 7 March 2014).

Political capital draws on the organizing principles of a pyramid or ladder of engagement. It's a common term in marketing and political organizing that refers to how to increase member engagement in a movement from joining a mailing list to volunteering for the campaign. NationBuilder suggests using political capital to “track supporters & prospects and move them

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3 NationBuilder labels this feature social capital for non-profit organizations.
up the ladder of engagement.” Ladders and pyramids differ from campaign to campaign. Emma Gilchrist worked with Salesforce at Dogwood, when they developed their own pyramid by working with consultants and it took “lots of staff discussions about what our own levels should be and what should qualify for different levels and why. For us, and I think this is pretty common out there though is a number of different frameworks for this kind of thing, it became [about] people being more self organizing towards the top” of the pyramid (personal communication, 5 March 2014). These examples suggest that while political capital might be baked into NationBuilder, developers and organizations have a lot of work in adapting its tiers and their own program of actions.

NationBuilder allows campaigns to customize the ladder of engagement associated with political capital. Political consultants using NationBuilder actively work with their clients to create localized metrics for political capital. As Josh Stuart of cStreet clarified:

by default there are a whole series of values in it that are OK so almost no one ever customizes them. So what we've 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. It's important by what they are kind of going to do with it. (personal communication, 11 December 2013)

The ladder indicates the type of mediation taking place in merging NationBuilder with a campaign assemblage. Though NationBuilder does encourage clients use political capital, it's more of a pre-inscription of the module -- a question posed to developers that they must answer.

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4 http://nationbuilder.com/supporters
themselves (what Latour calls subscription for those interested).

*Other Aspects of NationBuilder to merge?*

Beyond the core features of Nations and political capital, is there a politics encoded deeper in its code, say its database? Somewhat. NationBuilder has actively worked to internationalize its product, but Canadians do notice occasionally some American concepts in its design. As Jost Stuart describes:

> if you are an American political or Canadian political campaign; the product is about 95% the same. The difference between Americans and us is that they have released a bit of localization so precincts are called wards in Canada, and there are little tiny things like that that work slightly differently. (personal communication, 11 December 2013)

Joe Federer admits that its level of internationalization is less than other CRMs where you could call any database field what you wanted. Instead some fields in NationBuilder continue to have US names.

Dan Walmsley admits that it's a challenge to NationBuilder to function internationally. They depend on new users signing up from different countries to help identify needed localizations. Finding these problems, he explains:

> depends on the sort of the early adopters in a particular country and what they are sort of focused on because often what will happen is that 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.” But we didn't go and try to start out by making it work in Italy, it just happened that someone in
Italy tried to sign up, same in Sweden, same in Australia. (personal communication, 7 March 2014)

The company has been working on internationalizing its database. He continues:

There are definitely some challenges to the [database] schema of representing political boundaries and jurisdictions. Inside our database we have basically a handful of fields that say whether or not they are in federal district five which is in such a such a state and that sort of thing and that varies from country to country and whether or not they are in different states... 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 (D. Walmsley, personal communication, 7 March 2014).

The language of the interface also requires substantive work to be international and it's in the process of offering more languages in its interface. Right now, its interface is in English (US) by default with support for English (UK), French Canadian and Spanish in beta. Adding a language is a major undertaking according to Walmsley:

The [quality assurance] and the iteration and the sort of performance testing and pipeline of kind of finding translators and integrating them into our development work, so that we can still deploy three to five times a day dozens of changes a time and not have it break in any single language. That is a really, really hard thing to do, much harder than adding a currency to a list of currencies that's like hard-coded into the product somewhere. (D. Walmsley, personal communication, 7 March 2014)
This work demonstrates that being international is far more than being a product that simply travels across borders.

Merging software modules then differs from both news coverage of software and some approaches to global political communication. When covering the flow of American technology North, Canadian journalists imply that these software have values built in. They are forces importing American style campaigning into Canada, but it's not a one-way flow of communication as Plasser (2002) describes in his review of the literature. Consultants adapt to NationBuilder while also adopting its program of political capital. With these nuances in mind, we would like to discuss some of the wider processes of merging NationBuilder in Canada.

“Too Small for Big Data? Different system!

Even with many interviewees praising NationBuilder's functionality and low price point some of its features do not necessarily mesh as well, as some tenants of data-driven campaigning do not mesh with the Canadian context. Federally, the Canadian electoral ridings limit the number of eligible voters for one campaign to 63,000 to 120,000 people. The smaller population makes it difficult to best optimize messaging based on testing. As an anonymous interviewee explains:

I think there is just the challenge that [Canada has] a much smaller population. When you look at an organization, and there are a few that have over say 100-200,000 active on their email list in Canada, I mean that is very significant in a population just over 30 million. When you look at, on scale at an organization like Greenpeace or Sierra Club, some of the big environmental groups that I'm familiar with, you are looking at one million active in a population of 30 million. So you know the lists are always going to be a bit smaller because of that. (anonymous, personal communication 19 February 2014)
The smaller population limits the applicability of testing in NationBuilder. It's harder to have a relevant sample from a smaller list. Testing as a result takes more time:

It does take a fair amount of traffic to become statistically relevant and so it's totally doable in Canada and with medium sized groups it sometimes just stops being a rapid response thing and a longer game where it runs for like six weeks and then you're actually making the evolution in the layout because it took six weeks to just get a large enough sample size. Whereas with a huge campaign you might know that in the afternoon and deploy it in the evening. (J. Stuart, personal communication, 11 December 2014)

Testing, as Stuart mentions, cannot be a rapid response event suggesting that optimization cannot be as responsive as the tests have to run longer. More time, however, can be difficult in a short campaign. The electoral period is extremely short - in comparison to US counterparts -- so building a Nation and testing may not be the most viable feature.

Less Access to Voter Data in Canada

Limited access to voter data complicates merging political software. Most political software requires voter information to populate their database, but data is harder to find in Canada. While NationBuilder can import social media data to build a Nation, political campaigns in the United States use the voter list to populate its database. Political data is easier to access in the United States than in Canada. VoterListsOnline sells data from $0.03 to $0.12 per record. NationBuilder offers a free voter file to campaigns. The same data does not exist as openly in Canada, but the reasons for the lack remain unclear. Privacy law and election law partially

explain the difference. The Canada Elections Act only allows registered political parties to access the voter list. Section 111 states that “knowingly use personal information that is recorded in a list of electors for a purpose other than (i) to enable registered parties, members or candidates to communicate with electors in accordance with section 110, or (ii) a federal election or referendum.” Privacy law differs from province to province. Other major personal information legislation in Canada, notably the Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act, the Do Not Call List and the Spam Act, exempt political parties.

The data industry is not as active in Canada as the US. Third-parties can and do sell voter data though how they can connect to the voter data, but the industry is much smaller. Its difficult to cite why Canada is so different from the United States in terms of political data, but practitioners notice the difference. Consultants cannot afford third-party data or access other sets of relevant data.

You can [buy data]... It's kind of expensive. You can buy the AirMiles database for instance, or Shopper Drugmart's Optimum programme and it's just that people don't – in the US voter files are a big business, this data has been purchased and updated and licensed to like hundreds of campaigns. (J. Stuart, personal communication, 11 December 2014)

Donation limits also diminish the return on investment for finding the right voters even in provincial election with limits higher than the Federal limit. As Martins admits,

buying the subscriber list to the Gun and Rod magazine might be really good, the problem is if they don't live in my riding. So of the people who are subscribers to that magazine which ones live in my area, so great I got five, so I just paid how many
thousands of dollars for that list with five names. What's the point? (M. Martins, personal communications, 5 March 2014)

The return-of-investment might not be enough to justify the investment. Data might be too expensive, but it might not exist at all. As Hamish Marshall explains:

The biggest thing when it comes to privacy laws in Canada is you can't buy the data. In the States I can go and buy credit bureau data. So I can go and buy your record, if you lived in the States, and I can find your age, if you are married, if you own a car, if you own or rented your home, as well as I might be able to buy from certain providers a list of some of the larger purchases you have done. (H. Marshall, personal communication, 21 March 2014)

Costly voter data and low donation amount means a higher risk for a lower reward for a campaign. It might not break even to buy a list to only find one or two more donors.

Official do receive voter data during the start of the official campaign, a minimum of 36 days, but political consultants treat the release as too late. Elected officials often begin the campaign long before the actual start date -- a factor of continuous campaigning. As Stuart express:

in the US we would have access to a voter file, almost for sure, that we wouldn't have here. We probably wouldn't even have the list of electors, until like really close to the election in the big scheme of things, we might only be three weeks out that you might actually have the list of all the eligible voters which is totally, totally crazy. (J. Stuart, personal communication, 11 December 2014)

Delayed access favours incumbent campaigns who have a copy of the voter list from past
campaigns or from the central party.

Now the average campaign in Canada I would say is getting their data from previous campaigns. The legitimacy of that is highly questionable, just that nobody questions it, nobody challenges it, there are lists just floating around. (M. Martins, personal communication, 5 March 2014)

Products like NationBuilder might be cheap and accessible, but they might also be useless without access to a voter list to populate it.

**On-going debate between new and old organizing in Canada**

Another challenge facing political consultants and campaigners in Canada is that regardless of the potential for using data or new software to get-out-the-vote there is still resistance for investing in products or embracing its potential. “Whether or not enough municipal candidates recognize the importance of having a database is a different story entirely – it's typically not the thing that gets invested in” (H. Marshall, personal communication, 21 March 2014). Not only do political consultants have to sell the idea that these tools can make a difference and are a good investment, they have to try to speak to an old style of political organizing that permeates the organizations. Emma Gilchrist, a political organizer recounts that in environmental movements in Canada,

I don't actually think that the cost of those solutions is the main barrier to curb pursuing. It's more of a culture problem and there needs to be a serious shift in the way things work and even when groups do pursue them they don't necessarily use them to their full potential because you know they have a lot of baggage in terms of the way things used to be done. (E. Gilchrist, personal communication, 5 March 2014)
Marshall suggests that there has not been a change in political culture since the use of these technologies have been introduced. Rather gut reaction or opinion still seem to bear more importance, people, “especially moderately successful people in politics, have opinions based on their experience and if they are not numbers people and most people in politics by nature are not numbers people they are people, they are less likely to listen” (H. Marshall, personal communication, 21 March 2014). Even as campaigns begin to acknowledge investing in this department is “something that is important and they are willing to spend some money on it, but whether or not that actually affects their opinions or their action is another story entirely” (H. Marshall, personal communication, 21 March 2014). Mitch Wexler echoes this in terms of on-the-ground campaigning that when it comes down to it “some people still use good ol' Excel, and you know God bless them. They have a tough time but they have been doing it for so many years and as long as they can make it work and volunteers are happy then, that's all that matters right?” (personal communication, 26 March 2014). Reservations about new styles of campaigning, especially the emphasis on data afforded by NationBuilder suggests that the merger of political software resonates with local debates about the future of campaigning.

**Conclusion**

Our research contributes both to the understanding about the trans-national flows of political technology and knowledge about the encoding of politics into software. Firstly, the case of Canada should interest international political communication scholars researching the tensions between the specificity of national political systems and the globalization of political consultancy. NationBuilder in Canada is an important case that illustrates the flows of political technology. It complements the existing literature on global alliances between ideologically aligned parties and advocacy groups. Second, our interviews unpack the complicated work to
merge software into the campaign assemblage. What does the product require? How does software encode the politics of its development context and does this encoding complicate its circulation or influence its adopter? Our interviews found that consultants merge features of NationBuilder, like political capital, to their particular campaign. Campaign length, financing tradition, and data laws also complicate how software can travel across the border.

We would add in the context of this conference that a qualitative approach is vital to understanding these flows. We have been able to gain first hand insights into the work done at the back-end of the campaign, in the organizational infrastructure that drives targeted new media campaigning. While it's important to measure effects, the infrastructure cannot be ignored. Our research describes how the technical infrastructures of campaigns change with the introduction of international software products.

Qualitative political methods have a lot more to contribute to understanding the flow and changes in political campaigning. While our research used interviews, we feel ethnographic studies would a great depth to the work of political consultants. The types of questions about how campaigns adapt political technology would benefit from embedded research observing how modules merge into the campaign assemblage. Could we observe the decision making process? Perhaps an awkward training session before sending volunteers into the field? A moment or enlightenment or failure when using the software in a campaign?

While we may be part of a discussion of Nationbuilder, it remains to be seen if it has an impact on elections in Canada. There is no way to predict whether or not federal parties will upgrade their software to American developed products. One might wonder if they will take a cue from Australian and British counterparts (that Canada shares a similar parliamentary system with) who are avidly converting to NationBuilder. As mentioned, in Canada, NationBuilder has been used
on numerous nomination, leadership and municipal campaigns however has not been adapted into federal politics. Marshall predicts that, “it's only a matter of time before one of the Canadian parties” begins to use NationBuilder (personal communication, 21 March 2014). As much as it may appear that NationBuilder is a 'solution' when it comes down to federal and provincial politics local candidates, especially those who are new candidates, it might not be the right tool for the job. The electoral system and short election period, is not conducive to 'nation' building. Rather tools that are easy and quick to learn for the eager volunteers to run a get-out-the-vote style campaign in less than six weeks may be more conducive for the job. A neighbour’s green grass might become astroturf when it gets to the other side.

List of Interviewers:

Anonymous, 12 December 2013

Anonymous, 19 February 2014

Anonymous, 28 March 2014

Dan Walmsley, Chief Technology Officer, NationBuilder, 7 March 2014

Emma Gilchrist, Writer/Editor DeSmogBlog, Engagement Consultant and Former Communications Director at Dogwood, 5 March 2014

Ethan Clarke, Co-Founder, Campaign Gears, 14 March 2014

Hamish Marshall, Chief Research Officer at Abingdon Research; President and COO at Go New
Appendix I

Interview Notes

About the Company

1. Can you tell us the story of the start of your company? Who founded it? Why?

2. What is your company now? How many employees? Number of campaigns? Where does it operate?

3. Could you describe in your own words what your company offers? What does it do?


5. What excites you about the sector? What keeps you motivated?

6. What are the challenges for your work in Canada?

7. What types of campaigns does it run?

8. Could you describe a typical workflow in taking on a new client? We're wondering about this process of thinking systematically about political organizing?

Depending on the software associated with the interviewee, we may ask some follow-up questions. These
relate to NationBuilder.

**NationBuilder**

1. Why did you choose NationBuilder?
2. Did you choose it from other options?
3. What is your relationship to NationBuilder?
4. Do you have much input into its development? How do you give its developers feedback?
5. Can you describe what is NationBuilder? What are its strengths? Weaknesses?
6. We're interested in this process of adapting software to particular countries. Does your implementation process differ from a Canadian campaign than an American one?
7. How much does the design of NationBuilder influence how you start with a new client?
8. How customizable is NationBuilder? How do you make sure an organization makes the best use of NationBuilder?
9. Do you see any of its American roots in the NationBuilder code?

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