

Stephen Harper as Killer Robot

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STEPHEN HARPER IS NOT A KILLER ROBOT,” claims a Tumblr blog that was active in 2011 to 2012. The subheader stresses the blog’s ironic tone: “Why would you even think that?” (Caribou). In popular culture and public discourse, especially on the Internet, the image of Canada’s former Prime Minister Stephen Harper is conspicuously characterized and caricatured as robotic and sinister. The critical popular representations of Harper that have proliferated in memes, social posts, and websites, as well as citizen journalism and mainstream news media, have prominently featured tropes of automation and automatism: zombies, Frankenstein monsters, cyborgs, and, above all, robots. Amidst popular culture’s hordes of anthropomorphized robots, Harper attained a peculiarly converse characterization as a robotized anthropomorph.

Whether it is made of metal, flesh, plastic, or software, the robot in popular culture is often characterized by two recurring features: first, it is manufactured by humans; second, it lacks human feeling or is even more radically non-human in its subjectivity. Take, for instance, the replicants devoid of empathy in *Blade Runner*; the relentlessly genocidal machines of *The Terminator*; the coolly dispassionate *Star Trek* android character, Data; the Cylons whom humans denigrate as “toasters” in *Battlestar Galactica*; and the renegade artificial intelligences (AIs) in 2001, *The Matrix*, *Her*,

Ex Machina, and *Transcendence*—while some of these latter AI figures evince or simulate affect, they more importantly behave in ways radically unknowable to humans. Furthermore, many robot figures in popular culture uncannily resemble humans, even as their radically non-human subjectivity threatens humankind (Vint 119).

Since the period of the Luddite revolts, when Mary Shelley wrote *Frankenstein* (1818), the figure of the automaton has furnished a cultural touchstone for popular anxieties about labour under industrial capital—about both the dehumanization of labour and the threat of its usurpation by automation. Frankenstein’s monster stands at the head of a long line of successor automaton figures in popular culture, including the zombie as a vapid, automaton-like figure of alienated labour (McNally 258) and the robot, which, as Susan Tyler Hitchcock reminds us, Karl Čapek’s 1920 play *R.U.R.* introduced to popular culture as a specific adaptation of Frankenstein’s creature (Hitchcock 136), and which, as Sherryl Vint reminds us, Čapek named with a word derived from the Czech word for “worker” (120). Since that introduction and coinage, popular culture has produced generations of variously mechanical, organic, and hybrid humanoid simulacra, androids, automata, replicants, and clones.

In something of a departure from the tradition in which the robot represents socio-economic anxieties about the automation of labour and ensuing loss of livelihood (Vint 119, McCutcheon and Barnettson 152), the image of Stephen Harper as killer robot figures anxieties about the automation of governance and ensuing loss of democracy. The image of Harper as robot provides a suggestive case for analyzing Canadian popular culture and the spectre of an automated body politic. This essay documents and theorizes the pattern of critical representations of the Harper government of 2006 to 2015 in popular culture, especially in digital media. Focusing on *critical popular representations* of the Harper government means simply focusing on texts, statements, and other cultural productions of criticism of and opposition to that government.¹

The popular image of Harper as a robot arose in satirical representations of his public persona as awkward and distant. This image also represents a critical response to Harper’s particular brand of conservatism, which combined “disciplinary neoliberalism” (Smith, “The Rise”

1 While many of the examples cited below may have been produced or distributed in support of other political parties, this investigation—while it openly shares with its objects of study an ethos of critical opposition to the Harper government and its agenda of disciplinary neoliberalism and extremist social conservatism—does not support or endorse any other party or policy instead.

para 14) and its established prioritization of corporate business interests (interests that are exclusively profit-oriented and consequently devoid of empathy; see Achbar and Abbot), and a correspondingly austere fiscal conservatism, with an evangelical-populist social conservatism characterized by an unsympathetic intolerance for minoritized and marginalized groups, an intolerance fomented amidst the Orwellian “war on terror” of the early twenty-first century. In addition, Harper’s leadership not only transformed Canadian conservatism but also transformed political campaigning (Livesey) via technologies of computing and automation that drew public comment and controversy, such as advanced data mining and robocalls. Furthermore, the Harper government’s sometimes seemingly single-minded prioritization of Canada’s oil industry (which has been widely criticized for exacerbating climate change; see McCutcheon, “Monster mines”) also fed the image of Harper as a killer robot.

The handshake

Maybe it was that infamous handshake that started it, the shake that launched a thousand quips. On 25 January 2006, some news media in Canada published a photograph of Harper seeing his kids off to school, saying farewell with not a hug but a handshake. This moment made for “one of the most damaging impressions Canadians formed of Stephen Harper” (Ibbitson para 1): it popularized the public image of Harper as socially awkward, coolly distant (even with family), and thoroughly businesslike. The handshake performed two core elements of Harper’s conservatism: its quasi-libertarian but certainly neoliberal commitment to business and its espousal of so-called “family values.” As portrayed in the media, the handshake signaled something of what “family values” mean to Conservative ideology: heteronormative and patriarchal values, performed in Harper’s reprise of the standoffish Victorian father figure; and evangelical Christian values, in that performance’s eschewal of the warmer gesture of the hug as opposed to the brisker gesture of the handshake. A handshake means business: it’s nothing personal, simply the sealing of a deal, the same as any handshake Harper as prime minister would transact with a fellow head of state or captain of industry. (In such cases, each handshake also becomes a double gesture—a double deal: through the particular live hands, shaking over a new arms deal or trade negotiation, reach the livid fingers of the dead hand of neoliberalism’s “zombie economics,” dead ideas reanimated to control and direct the haves and have-nots, as if automata in their own right in the capitalist world-system [Quiggin 2].)

Data mining and memes

In signaling Conservatism’s paternalism and business sense, Harper’s handshake with his children also signified something of his long-standing and well-documented interest in controlling his public image and party message as tightly as possible. And yet that handshake nevertheless sent signals Harper could not control, signals that would backfire, that galvanized his robotic reputation. “‘Proof he’s a cyborg,’ wrote one Liberal blogger at the time” (“Harper’s Handshake” para 5). In 2006, the comedy television show *Air Farce* presented a sketch in which an actor playing Harper makes robotic gestures, speaks in monotone, says programming lines out loud (“Smile at interviewer”), and threatens the interviewer with “the wrath of my heat vision” (“Stephen Harper Ad 1”). Harper’s handshake with his son became a familiar image around which critical popular characterizations of Harper as robot took root in Canada’s political imaginary.

By a coincidence of timing between Harper’s rise to power and the changing digital mediascape, the handshake also represented a mediated performance of that digital process (itself outmoded, even back in 2006) that is also called a “handshake”: the connection of a telephone modem to the Internet. Harper’s physical handshake could be read as evoking the digital transmission of the same name, a symbolic signal of and to an emergent Internet culture that began to respond with “killer robot” jokes and memes as a means to critically comment on the leadership and governance style of this intensely private (and politically privatizing) public figure. In January 2006, Harper shook hands not just with his children but also, in the widespread broadcast, print, and digital mediation of this gesture, with Canada’s burgeoning social media culture. The Harper government was Canada’s first government to attract a significant proportion of public criticism in the form of digital memes. The fact that Harper happened to be prime minister when the meme culture of the read-write web took shape globally is an accident of chronology—a correlation, not a causation. However, there’s something uncanny about the aptness of Harper’s purportedly cold and unfeeling public persona to meme-based commentary and criticism.

The robotic tropes of Harper’s social awkwardness stayed with him the whole time he held office. A 2009 blog post caricatured Harper as “Frankenstein-like creature who smiles with a two-second delay” (Chuckman para 6). A 2011 comedy sketch, shared on YouTube, portrayed a Harper character who confesses he’s a robot, lifting his shirt to show circuitry (McFayden et al.). During the 2015 election campaign, comedian Scott Vrooman explained the importance of the youth vote by coyly comparing

Harper to the Tin Man of Oz: “To Stephen Harper, each vote from a young person is like a theoretical harpoon through the place where his heart would theoretically be” (“A Tough Love Talk”; compare MacKinnon). One of several widely commented details in Harper’s 2015 election campaign was a television ad in which he stated his opposition to a rumoured Netflix tax. The news site *Vice* criticized this campaign ad with a robot trope: “Watch Stephen Harper convince millennials he is not a Netflix-hating robot” (Pearson para 1). And a Twitter parody account active only during the 2015 election, @PMHarperBot, paired photographs of Harper with quotations from Bender, the robot protagonist of the science fiction television cartoon *Futurama*. In the television show, Bender satirizes the conventions of pop culture’s robot figures. “I have no emotions,” Bender says in one episode, “and that makes me very sad”; @PMHarperBot quoted this line in a tweet captioning a photograph of a downcast Harper. Bender is characterized mainly by amoral greed and insatiable hedonism. “Well, what if I don’t *let* the new guy win?” reads one @PMHarperBot tweet, alluding to the robocalls scandal (see below). As a character that lampoons pop culture’s robot characters while voicing a megalomaniacal id, Bender furnished @PMHarperBot with ready-made lines for parodying Harper and the Conservative’s campaign.



Sample tweet by @PMHarperBot. Used with permission. Source photograph by Πρωθυπουργός της Ελλάδας, some rights reserved (CC BY-SA 2.0).

Public concerns
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Another factor contributing to Harper's robotic characterization has been his party's sophisticated use of voter databases and other information and communication technologies (ICTs) for maintaining its base and exploiting opportunities for strategic wins and growth. The CPC has distinguished itself among Canada's political parties for its advances in strategic data exploitation—sometimes courting public backlash for intrusive overreach ("Tories under fire" para 2). The Harper government's use of big data combined with its law-and-order agenda fed public concerns about the harmful impact of police-state laws and surveillance on citizens' rights and freedoms.

Just as public concerns over partisan data mining were voiced about Harper's campaign strategy, so were they voiced about his arguable blurring of campaigning and governance and the unclear distinction of data mining's roles in each (see Livesey). Consequently, public concerns about campaign data mining fed into ensuing concerns over data mining as a tool of state surveillance, as Harper's government pursued successively more sweeping law-and-order and anti-terrorism legislative proposals. In 2012, Public Safety Minister Vic Toews sponsored Bill C-30—a "cyber-security" bill that expanded police powers for dealing with Internet crime. Proponents of the bill described it as enabling "lawful access" to Internet Service Providers' (ISPs) customer data; after Toews presented the bill to Canadians as a stark choice between siding with the government or "with the child pornographers" (Toews quoted in Cheadle paras 3–4), Canadian Internet users reacted vehemently on Twitter, using the hashtag #TellVicEverything to mount a collective protest (Payton para 3). The ironic, self-consciously "Canadian" strategy of the #TellVicEverything protest was to publicly overshare, in tweets addressed to Toews, all kinds of personal information, as if to help the government's efforts to collect data on citizens. One Twitter user wrote, "@toewsvic I accidentally erased my browsing history. Can you tell me the url I was on at 2:30 p.m.? Thanks! #TellVicEverything" (@gpoc).

#TellVicEverything thus enacted a nationwide performance of both the private individual self and the collective citizenry, an uncanny doubling of modern bourgeois subjectivity across the media and networks supporting Canada's long tradition of "technological nationalism" (Charland 196) contextualized by postcolonial political economy and media imperialism. In this way, #TellVicEverything exemplifies the enactment of a mediatized and remediated successor to the internally divided, modern subject that I have dubbed the externally distributed "dubject":

The dubject is a self committed to its own recording; a subject translated from the site of the individual body to the mediated spaces of representation; a self dubbed and doubled—a *doppelgänger* self whose "live," corporeal presence becomes radically *supplemented* ... by its different and distributed embodiments in recordings and representations. (McCutcheon, "Toward" 237)

Aside from criticism of government overreach and technological performance of national identity, another effect of #TellVicEverything was to scramble the government's plans for intensifying online surveillance by flooding the Internet with a superabundance of personal data. The virality of memes—hashtags, in this case—became a tactic for increasing the noise-to-signal ratio of Internet communications, a collective grassroots exercise in digital counter-intelligence and disinformation.

Online public criticism of the Harper government's sweeping "anti-terrorism" legislation, Bill C-51, has been more varied and sustained, partly because of this bill's broader range of repressive powers, partly because it has been supported by the Liberal government that succeeded Harper's Conservatives. Bill C-51 (an "anti-terrorism" bill comparable to the U.S.'s Patriot Act) greatly expanded state powers for subjecting citizens to sweeping surveillance (Beers para 52), greatly reduced the accountability of those empowered to do so, and vastly expanded definitions of terrorism to include criticism of national energy policy (Stefanick 130). Public online criticism of Bill C-51—and of the Harper government's law-and-order, fight-terror-with-terror agenda more generally—has included the use of Twitter hashtags (like #KillBillC51), descriptions of Harper as "autocrat" (Dobbin para 5), and memes of Harper as robot and cyborg (as well as Big Brother). One anonymous user of the popular website Reddit created a stencil (for use in spray-paint-based street art) that caricatures Harper as Robocop (see on next page; quoted in rhinowaffle, "Robocop" para 3). C51 also drew comparisons of Harper to the Tin Man of Oz, as in a sketch on *This Hour Has 22 Minutes* about Harper's "anti-terror legislation": "we're being force-marched down the yellow-brick road of anti-democratic demagoguery ... straight into the Emerald City of total terror! And we're being led by the tin man guy with the dead eyes, with no heart" (see "Connie").



myheadhurtsalot. Harper-Robocop stencil template. Imgur.com, ca. 2012. Reprinted with permission.

As in the #TellVicEverything action, some highlights of the 2015 election campaign took shape around this kind of distributed, meme-based performances of technological-national identity, of a *doubled and spaced digital self*. Take, for example, the public outcries over the Harper's attempts to leverage xenophobia as an election campaign wedge issue—during a refugee crisis (Maloney para 1–6). Public opposition to this complex set of events took widespread digital shape as Canadians' online representations of themselves as voters (sometimes via meme-generating campaigns, like Rick Mercer's #VoteNation), as ethical positions (for example, posts using hashtags like #RefugeesWelcome), and sometimes as parody accounts, fictional constructs that sometimes made it hard to tell whether human or bot was operating them (for example, @PMHarperBot). Conversely, Canadians also questioned the extent to which the CPC campaign may have digitally simulated its support, for example by buying Facebook "likes" (Sherren para 20–21).

Critical digital images of Harper both evince and exacerbate cultural anxieties about automation and autocracy. They also comprise exercises of expressive freedoms and emergent cultural practices—like making and

sharing memes—that are vital and legal, yet still vulnerable to suppression (Coombe et al. 38). "Meme" describes, in general, an idea, image, or text that replicates and spreads readily throughout popular culture, "a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation" (Dawkins 192). On this definition, jokes, hashtags, video clips, aphorisms, and coinages (like "meme" itself) qualify as memes; Internet memes tend to be commonly characterized by their ease of reproducibility, brevity or small file size, use of wit or humour, and pop culture references. In this essay, I use the term meme in this more expansive sense. My analysis encompasses text-based memes like hashtags and image-based memes like, well, "memes": since the emergence of the read-write web, the word "meme" has come to mean a specific kind of digital object, "a sort of one-panel cartoon in which the caption is rewritten over and over" (Contrera para 14). Based mainly on the "LOLCats" phenomenon of the mid-2000s—in which photos of cats were paired with humorous, deliberately typo-riddled captions in Impact font—the common usage of "meme" connotes a photograph that is given different captions (often in Impact font) by different users, that is usually humorous in intent, and that can achieve rapid popularity—can "go viral"—as networked users replicate, vary, share, and repost the image.

The meme is a form of cultural production and reproduction that has distinctively and dramatically flourished in the early twenty-first century Internet, where it enjoys a global reach and popularity, as well as an ambiguous relationship to the discourse of authorship. Since the emergence and growth of the read-write web in the mid-2000s (that is, an open web characterized by user-friendly social platforms that make web publishing and interaction less about writing code and more about writing), memes have become a popular cultural form of user-generated content and a dependably entertaining element of public political discourse.

The "produser" (Bruns) who creates a meme wants to share and spread it—to make it "go viral"—but the produser usually holds no expectation of remuneration or material gain beyond an accrual of reputation capital. The meme is eminently available and exploitable for commodification (for example, the "Grumpy Cat" meme has led to books, baubles, and other merchandise), but the vast majority of memes appear and circulate more as non-commodity items in the Internet's emergent "gift economy" (Wark 153).

Many memes originate anonymously and if they go viral get so widely shared and relayed that they experience what William Gibson, speaking of and via Twitter, calls "attribution decay": the inability to determine the correct authorial origin of a given digital text or artifact. As social media

and their metadata-mining back-end systems have become more sophisticated, some mechanisms have emerged to determine meme authorship. For instance, Twitter can alert and acknowledge a user who first coins a hashtag that ends up trending, and a meme reference website, Know Your Meme, explains what popular memes mean and tries to document their origins and spread.

But such affordances lead only to frustration for the myriad memes that emerge anonymously, or pseudonymously, sometimes for tactical reasons, like defence against liability. If a meme uses ad hominem rhetoric, or reveals problematic or incriminating allegations or information, its creator courts liability for libel. Similarly, if the meme repurposes an extant, copyright-protected work—like a photograph, as many memes do—its creator risks liability for copyright or trademark infringement. Anonymous or pseudonymous production can provide a crucial protection from potential legal actions.

Alternately, memes that use trademarked or copyrighted works are arguably both sufficiently transformative in character and non-commercial in intent—thus neither mistakable for nor competitive with their source works—that they represent exercises of fair dealing: the statutory provision in copyright law that allows users (not creators) to make certain uses of protected works for specified purposes.

Despite recent gains for fair dealing in legislation and case law (Geist para 3–6), fair dealing constitutes a limited exemption that ultimately reinforces the rule of property in cultural production (Coombe et al. 39). The risks remain high for many reuses of copyrighted works. Shepard Fairey, the guerrilla artist-turned-acclaimed designer and muralist, was found guilty of copyright infringement for his use of a 2006 Associated Press photograph in designing the HOPE poster that became such an iconic feature of Barack Obama’s 2008 presidential campaign. Fairey faced up to six months’ jail time but was sentenced to two years’ probation and a \$25,000 fine (Ng para 1).

Fairey’s HOPE poster, in turn, became source material for more memes, including a parody that circulated online in the 2011 and 2015 Canadian elections. Bob Preston’s NOPE poster shows not a sombre Obama but a smirking Harper, darkens the composition’s palette with deeper-contrast shadows, and replaces the H in HOPE with N. Preston’s NOPE poster has itself spawned further versions. Preston says his “ironic take on Fairey’s Hope poster” was not intended “as an attack poster—for example portraying Harper as a vampire, thug or cyborg” (quoted in Maguire para 7). Unlike Fairey, Preston has faced no legal action for his work as yet.

No court has yet seen any case of alleged infringement by a meme creator; however, the stock photography licensor Getty Images has been extracting out-of-court settlements from not just meme creators but users who merely *share* the famous “Socially Awkward Penguin” meme (Dewey para 3). The potential threat of litigation for infringement or defamation may account for the widespread anonymity of meme production (not to mention that of many social media users and of those who post to web forums or comment sections). Memes are ubiquitous and significant components of digital culture, and if those who control the means of content access and distribution—what Wark calls the “vectoralist class” (152)—see profit in what few actions against memes have been undertaken so far, the Internet may risk becoming “a predatory content environment, where people share something, and it becomes prominent, and the rights-holder goes after everyone who shared it” (Hwang quoted in Dewey para 19).

Memes are also symptoms of an increasingly automated Internet—consider that many Twitter accounts are bots that “don’t even pretend to be human” (Elkus para 5). Many memes themselves are at least pseudo-automated, made by the use of mobile apps or website macros where a user adds their own caption to an existing photograph. Memes tend to use an identical photograph, varying only its caption. They can be quickly and widely reproduced via social sites, and they’re often anonymously produced. Additionally, the mass-reproduced quality of the meme form—its virality as a text widely replicated—made it an apt cultural form with which to criticize a governing political party widely perceived to consist of Harper and a robotic group of *copies of Harper* (a governing party that itself is perceived as a copy of the U.S. Republicans, about which more below). This critical public perception—of party “whip” politics carried to such an extreme it reduces party members to mere mouthpieces for *verbatim* repetition of approved talking points—is summarized in the title of Michael Harris’s 2014 book on Harper, *Party Of One*.

Maybe most importantly, though, memes—like all digital user-generated content—fuel the automated production of highly prized metadata (like users’ locations, Internet Protocol or IP addresses, browsing patterns, and traffic flows) for business and state analytic purposes. As I write elsewhere, the content of user-generated content like social media messages and memes may be oppositional and even subversive, but

their mode of production in occupying a corporate platform like Twitter ultimately provides free labour to feed the firm’s appetite for analytics, and thus bolsters its bottom line, just as

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well as noncritical content does. However critical the front-end content, the back-end analytics can only create a metadata doppelgänger that is a fully compliant and unprotesting puppet of neoliberal capital. (“Institutions” 144)

In light of the value of metadata for business and political interests, no user-generated content is bad content: it can all be scanned and mined to further private and partisan interests as effectively as (if not more so than) the public interest. As mentioned above, Harper’s party has invested heavily in data mining and digital monitoring. A CPC re-election strategy document leaked in 2014 outlined plans “to build a state-of-the-art data-scraping and data-mining machine to put to use on election day” (MacCharles para 11). The plans called for use of websites, social media, digital advertising, telefundraising, and phone polls, together with targeting and the mining of data on non-CPC sites and individuals. Tellingly, and rather ironically, the intent of this coordinated digital, data-driven campaign was to “put a more human face on the government” (MacCharles para 3)—to exploit computers’ vast calculation capacities to make Harper seem more humanly relatable and trustworthy as a leader. To be sure, all political parties engage in data mining and digital monitoring, if perhaps without comparable resources. But the extent and intensity of the CPC’s data mining, taken together with the public image of Harper as cold and unfeeling, his government’s intrusive surveillance and security policies, and the public perception of the CPC as a “party of one” peopled by Harper and his “clones,” have made meme production—in its pseudo-automated character and its digital mass reproduction—a particularly fitting form with which to comment on the Harper government. A 2015 tweet of a photograph of Harper as the Terminator—his face altered to look like a mask partially peeled away to show metal robotics beneath—took up the #BarbaricCulturalPractices hashtag (a rejoinder to the CPC election campaign’s exploitation of Islamophobia) to allude to the conservative law-and-order policymaking with a caption alleging Harper was “attempting to terminate democracy” (Owen). This tweet was retweeted—shared and reproduced by other Twitter users—fifteen times.

Robocalls

Another key event in the development of the critical popular image of Harper as killer robot—and an event that dramatically displayed the scope and power of partisan and government data mining and surveillance—was the “robocalls” scandal of the 2011 federal election. During the campaign and on election day that year, Elections Canada fielded around eight hun-

dred complaints from voters who had received automated phone calls, purportedly made by Elections Canada, that gave incorrect or misleading election information or otherwise posed nuisance or harassment to the household being called. After the election, in which the Conservatives won their first majority government, Elections Canada investigated the automated calls, and identified their source as an Edmonton-based private communications firm. In 2012, constituents from seven ridings asked Canada’s Federal Court to overturn the election results in their ridings because of how the automated calls—“robocalls”—had worked as voter suppression and skewed those ridings’ results, if not the whole election, given that Harper’s party won a majority by just 6,201 votes cast in fourteen hotly contested ridings (Peters and Boldt para 3). In 2013, a CPC campaign worker, Michael Sona, was charged with preventing voters from voting; the Federal Court found election fraud in the robocalls activity and identified the Conservatives’ voter database as the source for the contact details used to make the calls. Sona was convicted in 2014 (“Key facts” para 22). Ironically, Dean Del Mastro, the Conservative MP who was tasked to speak for the prime minister’s office on the robocalls scandal and its developments, was himself found guilty, in 2015, of having violated the Canada Elections Act in the 2008 election. However, Michael Keefer’s extensive research suggests that the extent of the 2011 voter-suppression activity remains underreported (Keefer, “Dimensions” para 8), that the preponderance of evidence could implicate the CPC up to its highest levels, that the Conservatives unrepentantly continued to use deceptive robocalls later in 2011 and subsequently in 2013, and that its so-called Fair Elections Act was yet another voter-suppression strategy (“After” para 18).

The robocalls voter-suppression fraud gave the Canadian public a wake-up call to the capabilities of ICTs not merely to mine citizens’ data and monitor their digital activity but more grievously to disrupt the fundamental democratic process. The robocalls scandal thus contributed significantly to the popular construction of a critical image of Harper as a killer robot, a technocratic “Terminator of a PM” (Etienne para 2; see also “is harper”).

The long timeline of the robocalls debacle’s legal proceedings, together with the continuing online recirculation of older news about the scandal, often flagged by the #robocalls hashtag, kept the Canadian public wary and vigilant of robocalls from 2011 to the 2015 election. The Internet saw not only a resurgent recirculation of earlier articles on the robocalls fraud but also new warnings to watch out for any suspicious or fraudulent activity during the 2015 campaign and election. The 2015 election did experience

some questionable campaigning and poll irregularities. First and foremost, the Harper government's "Fair Elections Act" was broadly criticized for making voting harder for young, indigenous, and poor voters (that is, those more likely to vote against Conservatives), and also restricted Elections Canada's ability to communicate election information to voters (Carson 16). This Act also permitted party scrutineers to use mobile devices inside polling stations, which meant Conservative party scrutineers (volunteers who monitor polling stations to protect a party's interest) could make privileged use of ProxiVote, a mobile app for reporting poll station updates that was developed by a firm with Conservative party ties (O'Malley para 19).

However, neither robocalls nor legislation significantly disrupted the 2015 election. Still sensitive to the robocalls scandal and freshly alarmed by the Fair Elections Act, Canadians used the Internet, especially social sites like Reddit and Twitter, as a public service announcement resource and knowledge base for alerting voters to potential election fraud and vote suppression and for suggesting solutions. In the process, such online activities contributed to a broad mobilization of the electorate—as did concerns over the new election legislation: "the Act, designed to suppress voter turnout, actually had the exact opposite effect" (Carson 17). What most effectively countered the prospect of election fraud in 2015 was the sizeable increase in voter turnout, which rose sharply from around 60 percent in 2011 to just below 70 percent in 2015—"Canada's highest voter turnout since 1993" (Paperny para 1).

The robocalls fraud and the public's continuing vigilance over voter suppression informed some appropriately automatic oppositional tactics in the 2015 election. For instance, an Alberta computer programmer designed and launched "Lenny," a set of pre-programmed and pre-recorded responses to telemarketers, whether commercial or political: "a series of pitch-perfect responses designed to fool callers into thinking they've reached a genuine person with genuine interest in whatever they're pitching" (Bostelaar para 7). Programmed to respond with plausible lifelikeness to formulaic telemarketer prompts, Lenny is tasked mainly to waste a caller's time, keeping them on the line and so reducing the number of calls they can make. One Lenny recording available on YouTube features a nearly twelve-minute exchange with a CPC campaign caller (see Bostelaar). Lenny is a kind of do-it-yourself parody of the Turing test (which posits that artificial intelligence succeeds if a human evaluator, separated from but listening to a conversation between another human and a computer, can't tell which is which).

Lenny is just one of several inventive automated interventions that users have introduced into Canadian online culture, interventions that pose fitting critical responses to a Conservative government characterized and caricatured in terms of robotism. Another example is @gccaedits, a Twitter "bot" account (an automated, self-maintaining account) that monitors *Wikipedia* for edits made from IP addresses that belong to the Canadian government. When a new *Wikipedia* edit is made from a federal government computer, the account tweets the page title and link, as well as the edit's originating IP address. As reported in *Maclean's* and *Vice* in 2014, @gccaedits tweeted about information-suppressing edits to Canadian senators' *Wikipedia* articles (see McGuire para 1, Shendruk para 9). Critical automata like Lenny and @gccaedits shrewdly apply digital affordances—programming, metadata, and simulation—to political intervention. They thus constitute critical appropriations of ICTs for redeployment against the state and corporate exploitations of similar ICTs that circumvent processes for private gain. Sheldon S. Wolin calls this circumvention "managed democracy: the expansion of private (i.e., mainly corporate) power and the selective abdication of governmental responsibility for the well-being of the citizenry" (156).

The robocalls scandal exacerbated the already established critical popular image of Harper as a killer robot, on several levels. Most obviously, it did so by faulting his party with dramatic machine intervention in electoral politics. An editorial cartoon in the 27 February 2012 *Globe and Mail* shows helicopters from a "Rogue Robo-Caller Division" in the skies over Parliament Hill circling a giant, red-eyed robot gripping a phone receiver; one chopper pilot says to the other, "Remember when Canadian politics used to be about debating legislation and stuff?" (Gable). But more subtly, the scandal also invigorated public discourse concerning the connections between Harper's Conservatives and U.S. Republicans and spawned related tropes of the CPC as both an "invasion of the vote snatchers" (Danno) and a "Republicanized ... invasion of the [Tory] party snatchers" (Climenhaga para 11). How those connections themselves contributed to Harper's killer robot image will be taken up below, following discussion of a further aspect of Harper's government (and CPC similarity to Republicanism) that has helped to construct that image: its intense interest in the oil industry.

Big oil

In popular culture, from *Machine Man* to *The Matrix*, from *Forbidden Planet* to *Futurama*, it is often oil that is to robots what blood is to humans,

a liquid elixir of life (or at least life's simulation). In political economy, oil is to democracy what money is to politics, a resource that often produces "a democratic deficit" (Shrivastava and Stefanick 11). As the Harper government proceeded with its corporatist, social conservative agenda, the popular image of Harper as killer robot became fueled by his pronounced prioritization of oil (Stefanick 122), the object of so many Conservative policies that were steamrolled over the state, at exorbitant expense, both economic (Lukacs para 2) and ecological (Parajulee and Wania 3344). Oil fills out the killer aspect of Harper's popular construction as robot, in his government's reckless wrecking of environment-protecting research, programs, and policies (Amend and Barney 12), paired with repressive information control (13; see also Brodie 117), all to advance the interests of an industry driving environmental futurelessness. The Harper government's climate-change-exporting policies literalized the figurative observation that Harper was willing to burn the house down if it meant he could hold on to the lot (Livesey para 13).

The industrial imagery of Harper's robot characterization—spectacularly mechanical and metallic—articulate his government's massive, preoccupying overinvestment in the high-industrial extraction resource of fossil fuel, a staple of mechanized industry that harbours its own "fossil" themes of obsolescence: take, for instance, the oppositional rhetoric of "dinosaur" policies that protect outmoded business models and dated industrial interests or, for a related example, the "fossil awards" given at climate-focused global summit meetings the Climate Action Network to the nation with the worst record for climate change inaction—awards that Canada has repeatedly won for several years since they were inaugurated in 2008. Harper, then, is also popularly seen as a late, dated replicant of Bush's petro-plutocratic administration (Sabongui paras 5–6). The oil industry also activates numerous and varied Frankenstein analogies and adaptations (see McCutcheon, "Monster mines"). Accordingly, one Green Party campaign image depicts Harper as a giant, red-eyed, rivet-riddled robot—an oil-fueled, obsolete colossus—its arms reaching forward like those of Karloff's iconic Frankenstein creature, expelling billows of black smoke while it tramples the countryside (Olson quoted in Mandel). Similarly, a 2013 blog post used an altered image of Harper's face as the mask of a *Terminator* robot for a parody news piece about Harper "caught on tape drinking oil" (Moher para 1). Shortly after the 2015 election, the CBC comedy site Punchline ran a story about "embarrassing objects" Harper left at the prime ministerial address; first on the list were "cans of oil": "With oil being necessary to lubricate mechanical moving parts of any

robot or android, it's long been assumed that Harper has relied on a squirt of oil now and again to stop himself from malfunctioning or overheating" (Hartnett para 1).

Throughout Harper's time in office, syndicated political cartoonist Michael de Adder published many cartoons featuring a "Darth Harper" character that was widely reproduced and adapted across Canadian print and digital media (compare Martin, "Darth Harper"; see also Adams). "Darth Harper" figures Harper as the part-man, part-machine villain from the *Star Wars* films. One 2013 cartoon, "Attack of the Clones," shows Darth Harper at a desk of advisors (who are all Harper clones); he gets angry about the U.S. government's inaction on the Keystone XL pipeline. De Adder's Darth Harper represents a figure enabling satire of not only the Harper government's support for the planet-threatening oil industry (although the climate change it exports makes for less dramatic violence than "Death Star" explosions) but also Harper's autocratic governance style, his distant public persona, and, in de Adder's adaptation of *Star Wars*, Harper's reputation as an adaptation of U.S. Republicanism.

There are many copies

Harper has been popularly perceived as a copier of the U.S. Republicans' political playbook, "as a mean-spirited Republican disguised as a Canadian" (Livesey para 40). The specific ties between U.S. conservatives and Harper are well documented, as in Marci MacDonald's history of his party's ideological and strategic grounding in the Calgary School, a coterie of Western Canadian intellectuals informed by and connected to Republicans (paras 33–35). The present study has discussed several significant similarities: the investment in sophisticated data-mining technologies and surveillance strategies; the use of such technologies and strategies to constantly campaign and to interfere with elections as means to "manage democracy" (Wolin 273; compare Keefer, "Evidence" para 1); a political agenda characterized by "fiscally and socially conservative" policies (Stefanick and Shrivastava 18); and the advancement of corporate energy fossil fuel interests under the auspices of "economic security," articulating repressive "anti-terror" policies agendas with attacks on public-interest research and environmental protections (Stefanick 116). As Lorna Stefanick and Meenal Shrivastava argue, "these trends pertaining to democratic accountability and developmental liberalism ... [are] prompting a country that is statistically not a petro-state to behave like one in terms of its disregard for the basic tenets of liberal democracy and for sustainable economic and environmental objectives" (399).

Because “these trends” include the centralization of prime ministerial power and intimate ties between industry leaders and political officials (399), as well as strict party discipline and inattention to marginalized and impoverished social groups (399; see also Mallick para 7), many memes and commentaries depicted Harper and his party as a remote-controlled horde, an “attack of the clones” (de Adder). CPC members of Harper’s cabinet and of parliament were characterized as robots, clones, and drones, as in an activist group’s YouTube video that shows thirteen Conservative MPs “drone on like robots,” each saying exactly the same thing in their separate messages (see “Watch 13 Conservative MPs”). An article in *The Beaverton* (a Canadian news satire website) parodied *The Terminator*, with its headline “Harper’s granddaughter travels through time to warn nation”; the article jokingly reported that Harper replaced “the entire public service with cheaper, hyper intelligent poly-alloy robots” (“Stephen Harper’s granddaughter” para 3). The CPC became popularly depicted as a self-regenerating hive, its clone-like members thinking with one hive mind, those members embodying a quite limited range of models: “Harper cabinet ministers ... were quickly reduced to puppets reacting to every pull on the strings from the prime minister” (Harris chapter 1).

Both these contexts of political replication and copying—Harper as a copy of U.S. Republicanism, CPC members as copies of Harper—have fed Canadians’ generation of critical images of Harper and his party as “the Borg” cyborg society from the *Star Trek* television and film franchise and as the “Cylon” robots from the *Battlestar Galactica* television series. In *Star Trek*, the Borg is an alien civilization of cyborg bodies that share one common subjectivity, a “hive mind”; it is a civilization that “assimilates” all others it encounters to its hybrid, mechanic-organic conglomerate. During the 2015 election, one Twitter user the hashtag #HarperBorg to describe the “Watch 13 Conservative MPs” YouTube video (@albertarabit). Another user posted an image of Harper’s face augmented with tubes, metal plating, and a red electric eye; the image, also tagged #HarperBorg, was widely shared on Facebook and retweeted (Frankel). In *Battlestar Galactica*, the Cylons are a society of autonomous robots devoted to exterminating the human race. Some Cylons are metallic, mechanical soldiers; others are organic androids who are only distinguishable from humans in two ways. First, the android Cylons have identical physiques: “there are six models” and “there are many copies” of each model (see McCutcheon, “Downloading”). Second, the Cylons are characterized as devoid of empathy and emotion. A 2006 blog post compared very similar public statements by Harper and then-U.S. president George W. Bush and

described both leaders as “Cylon clones” (Evans). Dozens of tweets dated from 2008 to 2015 joke that Harper is a Cylon (for example, @deBeauxOs); many of these tweets link to a 2008 YouTube video that parodies the opening title sequence of *Battlestar Galactica* with reference to the CPC (Smith, “Harper”). The public’s sense of the Harper Conservatives’ culture of copying prompted many such critical images, memes, and comments depicting Harper himself and CPC party members as robotic copies and as unconvincing simulations of humanity.

Harper came to be seen as a strategic assemblage of aggregated demographic data points, a carefully composed reflection of the polity (or at least of the Conservatives’ base). But this reflection was also caricature, a composite sketch of compiled data, a visage of the “body-machine complex”: the body dangerously supplemented by technology, “terminal, terminator-like” (Seltzer 103). The public dislike of Harper is the rage of Canada seeing a sociopathic simulacrum of its own face in a glass. The pseudo-automated proliferation of critical images of Harper as killer robot, then, expressed opposition to a party identified too closely with its leader and a leader identified with automation, calculation, and radical instrumental rationalization: in a word, with robotization.

Mechanization takes command

In politics, automation is anathema to democracy; it is far more amenable to fascism, to autocracy, to the totally micromanagement political regime, even a regime that retains the appearances of democracy (Huxley chapter 12). As the Harper government consolidated its power and implemented its agenda, the image of Harper as robot came to express urgent political concerns over the automation of Canadian governance. Images of Harper as “killer robot” stoked popular disquiet about Harper’s own oddly affectless enactments of “everyman” relatability; about the gradual retreat of governance into the black box of an increasingly centralized prime minister’s office; about Harper’s overriding of parliamentary procedure and scientific evidence; about his cloning of U.S. Republican ideology and strategy; about the electoral system’s vulnerability to data-driven gaming and automated rigging; and about the government’s ravenous pursuit of oil production and protection. Above all, such images articulate concerns about the automation of democratic governance. As Friedrich Kittler warned decades ago: “Data flows once confined to books and later to records and films are disappearing into black holes and boxes that, as artificial intelligences, are bidding us farewell on their way to nameless high commands” (xxxix).

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The image of Harper as robot is, in broad terms, a symptom of the state's regulatory capture by capital's exclusive profit motive, of advanced capitalism's total focus on the quantifiable at the corresponding total cost of whatever in human life is qualifiable (Sayre and Löwy 90), and of extreme social conservatism's antipathy to oppressed and equity-seeking persons and social groups. If the popular distrust of workplace automation is founded on deeply rooted fears of losing one's livelihood to an industrial machine, the popular distrust of automation in the political sphere is founded on equally deep-seated fears of losing one's franchise, citizenship, or even life (as police and military drones take to the skies in fast-growing numbers), to a political black box, a bureaucratic machine run amok. In the 2015 election, the Canadian public voted to terminate that machine. Canadians voted (and did so in markedly higher numbers) partly to test the extent to which Canada's democratic institutions had been hacked and hijacked by automation, algorithms, and artificial intelligence. Suffice to say, at the time of writing in the wake of the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the popular distrust of automation in electoral politics is neither exclusively focused on the Harper government nor restricted to Canada. Controversies rage, in the U.S. and around the world, over the potential manipulation and even hacking of democratic voting systems, especially electronic systems (Swaine). Since the contestation of results in the 2000 and 2004 U.S. elections (Keefer, "Evidence"), the security of democracy as a political system has increasingly become a question concerning technology, with many experts in democracy security insisting that hand-counting paper ballots remains a "gold standard" for democratic electoral systems precisely because of its high-labour, low-technology character (National Election Defense Coalition). Public fears about automation and corresponding disenfranchisement from democratic institutions are necessarily global fears, given the globalized character of digital technologies. Whether Canada, for its part, will get the change the nation voted for in 2015, by ousting one business party in favour of the other business party, remains to be seen; as of this writing it is still too soon to tell. Is the Terminator still out there? Is resistance ultimately futile? Meet the new bot, same as the old bot?

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