Canadian Content: The Authorized Version

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Abstract: This article asserts that to make Canada’s presence felt, we must understand the importance of the base-level information held by the country’s preserving institutions (museums, libraries, and archives), and government must fund them to make their rich database content accessible on-line. The author suggests that Canada’s meagre Internet presence can be strengthened by developing authoritative databases of Canadian literature, history, and art in full text, full image, or full audio and video format. Meanwhile, preserving agencies must abandon the notion that they are re-creating themselves in a virtual universe. Access to deep and authoritative content is what the next generation demands, not poor simulacrum of actual experience. This is the information that will transform and ultimately distinguish Canada’s Internet presence.

Résumé : Cet article affirme que, pour manifester la présence du Canada dans le monde, il faut reconnaître l’importance des données de base détenues par les institutions de conservation du pays (muséums, bibliothèques et archives). Le gouvernement doit subventionner ces institutions pour leur permettre de faciliter l’accès en ligne à leurs riches bases de données. L’auteur soutient que l’on peut renforcer la faible présence Internet canadienne en développant de solides bases de données sur la littérature, l’histoire et l’art canadiens en formats plein texte, plein image, plein audio ou plein vidéo. En attendant, les agences de conservation doivent abandonner l’idée qu’elles sont déjà en train de se recréer dans un univers virtuel. En effet, la prochaine génération exige l’accès non à de pauvres simulacres d’expériences réelles mais à un contenu riche et sûr. C’est un tel contenu qui transformera la présence Internet canadienne et en assurera un caractère distinct.

The organizers of the Information Deficit: Canadian Solutions conference, held in October 2001 in Calgary, stated that this conference would serve as a forum to examine Canadian content on the Internet and to suggest action aimed at increasing and improving Canada’s presence on the World Wide Web. The

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Does Canada’s Internet presence need improving?

The conference organizers state that a recently funded Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) study found only 200 Canadian sites that meet basic scholarly standards. On the other hand, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), accepted grudgingly by most Canadians as the federal government’s regulatory agency to ensure a Canadian presence in broadcasting and publishing, feels that just as government has no place in the bedrooms of the nation, it equally has no reason to peer into its Web sites: “In the Commission’s view, there is no apparent shortage of Canadian content on the Internet today. Rather, market forces are providing a Canadian Internet presence that is also supported by a strong demand for Canadian product . . . The Commission concurs with the majority of participants that there is no reason for it to impose regulatory measures to stimulate the production and development of Canadian new media content” (CRTC, May 17, 1999).1 If the CRTC is satisfied with our presence, should anyone else be concerned?2

How much of the Internet is Canadian?

It is important to understand what we mean by Canada’s presence on the Web. Substantially less than 1% of domain names are registered as .ca,3 a similar figure to Canada’s proportion of world population. This figure excludes, of course, the .com Web sites operated by Canadians and the Canadian-built sites at places like geocities.com. How much presence should a country boasting less than 1% of the world’s population require? Does it matter that our presence on the Web is modest? It does if we think about the number of Canadians who access information on the Web. It is estimated that there are more than 513 million people on-line in the world, and Canada and the United States together account for over 180 million of them (“How many online?” http://www.nua.com/surveys/how_many_online/index.html).

Exactly how many Canadian subscribers is harder to say, but according to Statistics Canada, 51% of all Canadian households surveyed in 2000 had at least one occupant who could be described as a regular Internet user, up from 42% in the agency’s 1999 survey (Statistics Canada, July 26, 2001). More significantly, the number of young Canadian users on-line, from home, from school, from public libraries, or even from work, is very high. Nine out of every 10 teenagers aged 15 to 19 reported using the Internet at some time in the 12 months prior to the survey, the highest proportion of any age group (Statistics Canada, March 26, 2001). A study by Forrester Research also suggests that today’s youth represent the first truly networked generation. “Just as previous generations internalized the automobile and television, integrating it into every aspect of their adult lives, today’s 16- to 22-year-olds will become the first Net-powered generation” (For-
The generation will look first to the Web to answer questions, and secondly to more traditional reference materials.

What do we mean by content anyway?
So, our Web presence is modest, unregulated by any authority, but our appetite appears to be large and growing. What kind of content will Canadians find on the Web, and in particular what will young Canadians be able to learn about their country and its place in the world from the Web? As a historian and museum director, I am concerned that the kind of content I find significant, and that I believe is important to others, particularly to students, may not have a fair chance of making it on the Web.

Many people worry that the Web is and will continue to be an English-language network, dominated by the culture products of the United States. The United States Internet Council (USIC) is, however, worried that even now, users who speak English as their primary language constitute less than half of all persons using the Net, though these numbers are boosted by those who speak English as a second language (2001). By 2003, the research firm Gartner expects Asia-Pacific, including Japan, to have 183.3 million subscribers, a larger number than the estimated 162.8 million subscribers in the United States and the 162.2 million in Europe (IDG, 2001). Even if English does continue to be the lingua franca of Web sites, the USIC realizes there is no guarantee that culture necessarily follows language. Princess Mononoke and Pokemon have dominated youthful North American imaginations for a number of years, and it is difficult to believe that the flood of stories and images that has begun to flow from non-Western cultures will abate.

Where within that huge global current will be the stories and images that make up Canadian content, and who will provide them? It is here, I think, that there exists the most telling difference between presence and content. Canadian presence includes the Web sites of Canadian companies, magazines, newspapers, non-profit organizations, and individuals. Individual sites can be dedicated to all manner of Canadian topics, from the Avro Arrow to Céline Dion to the recipe for poutine (http://www.scarabee.com/TRANCHES/poutine.html). All these sites contribute to our presence as a nation on the Web. All these sites can be defined as Web content, but I think what this conference wants us to look at and what concerns me is the idea of a more specific “Canadian content,” the kind that we have agonized over for a number of generations, the kind that the Massey Commission wanted us to preserve and promulgate, our particular and peculiar view of our corner of the world.

I am alarmed to realize that in my own childhood, at least in English-speaking Canada, the stories and images that dominated my imagination originated for the most part from the two greatest English-speaking powers, Great Britain and the United States. This dominance was assured through the use of American textbooks, the penetration of American television and movies in the Canadian domestic market, and the relatively impoverished Canadian publishing industry. By the time I was in high school, I was more familiar in literary terms with the
people and landscapes of England or the American South than with those of my own country. There was a sense, I think, that we were minor players on the world stage, and that if we were to have any role at all, we must prepare ourselves by learning as much as we could of the history and culture of the main actors.

To a great extent this notion of the significance of the main actors still dominates the definitions of an emerging world culture, at least as they appear on the Web. At Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, for example, the vision statement for its “Universal Library” includes this maxim: access to all human knowledge, anytime, anywhere. A review of today’s Web-based digital library resources reveals that “all human knowledge” is likely to refer to the classic texts in literature, history, and science, and to famous collections, such as Old Masters at the Louvre. As Asia comes on-line, the classics will undoubtedly expand to include The Tale of Genji and the Ramayana. The amount of Canadian material is clearly limited. While Canadian students can access the complete text of Charles Darwin’s On the Origin of Species in both languages, and the inaugural addresses of all United States presidents, they are less likely to find complete texts of Canadian novels, histories from our own point of view, or even a comprehensive selection of the works of Canadian artists.

Whose responsibility?
We have an opportunity now to make our presence a bit more felt, to go from a walk-on role to a speaking part on the world stage. The truly novel thing about the Web is its ubiquity. My son in Europe reads the Globe every day in an Internet cafe, then e-mails us his views on the latest crisis in Canadian politics. Anyone anywhere in the world can read the Globe, should they so desire, and form opinions about us and our political life. If world culture is to include a Canadian component, we must be prepared to put it there. And I do not believe that we can leave the responsibility to supply Canadian content exclusively to individuals or the marketplace, without considering the role of authorities.

I am conscious that the notion of authority is often seen as antithetical to the Internet, but I also realize that not all content can be considered “authoritative,” in the sense of the Oxford English Dictionary, as something “proceeding from a competent authority.” Anyone who has spent anytime on-line looking for anything is aware that the quality of what is out there varies through an enormous range, from inane to irrelevant to arcane. I also know that authoritative content—accurate and comprehensive, created by a recognized author—has a ready market. The Forrester Research study of young adults suggests that those who have internalized the Web into their lives have also developed a set of unwritten rules that reflect their expectations. Rule Number One is “Information is everywhere—deep and accurate information should be available anywhere at any time.” The Web is fast becoming universal, but deep and accurate information is not necessarily the rule.

Who are the authors, the competent authorities, who can ensure that Canadians and others have access to reliable, accurate, and significant information about this country? I would like to propose that provision of access to this kind of
information is the mandated priority of its preserving institutions—its museums, libraries, and archives. These institutions can and do provide what Forrester’s Net Generation is looking for. They concern themselves with the comprehensiveness of their holdings and the accuracy of their information, in both their physical and virtual sites.7 Or at least they try to. Hampered by inadequate funding, their efforts are often piecemeal or incomplete. Cutbacks in public funding have made it difficult for these institutions to keep the doors open and their networks operating, let alone prepare content for their Web sites. They suffer as well from the strange misapprehensions of some decision-makers and funding agencies. Museums and archives, even public libraries, are variously described as elitist, boring, or irrelevant. This belies their public presence. I can speak more expertly about the museum community, but a number of studies in Britain, Canada, and the United States in the past 20 years have revealed the important place these institutions hold in people’s hearts and minds. More than half the Canadian population visits a museum or historic site at least once every year. In the United States the attendance at historic sites and museums annually exceeds that of professional sporting events. And a recent study of history teaching revealed that Americans rank the reliability of museums above that of either high school or university history teachers, and far, far above that of books, film, and television. Yet there is minimal funding available for these institutions to make their resources available.8

What these institutions can offer is the database content that powers the nation’s Web presence. From the full text of the Jesuit relations to the images of the Group of Seven or the letters of Louis Riel, the preserving institutions provide the original sources on which the imaginative constructions of scholars, amateurs, and students can be built. Too often, however, what these institutions are asked to provide, to conform to funding requirements, are “accessible” popular projects, virtual exhibitions, or “fun” projects for schools. If we want this generation and the next to tell Canada’s stories and to make our presence felt on the global stage, we must realize the importance of the base-level information held by the preserving institutions, and we must fund them to make it accessible. This is the information that will transform Canadian content. We have it, and it is significant.

We owe it to the future to develop authoritative databases of Canadian literature, history, and art in full text, full image, or full audio and video format, if we want to ensure that “all human knowledge” includes that created by Canadians. These authoritative databases are the creation of the preserving institutions. It is only these institutions—the museums, libraries, and archives—that have the expertise, the collection, and the resources to continue to build and maintain these culturally necessary databases of original materials. These agencies must abandon the notion that they are re-creating themselves in a virtual universe. Users do not want to tour “virtual museums” or browse “virtual bookshelves.” While early attempts at such interfaces are of some minor interest, they deflect agencies from the real work of preparing on-line content. Ubiquitous access to deep and authoritative content is what the next generation demands, not poor simulacrums of actual experience.
Government must be willing to support the efforts of the content-holding institutions to make this content available on-line, through subsidization of digitization, translation, and research into user needs. Government must be willing to see the development and maintenance of on-line authoritative content as a priority for Canadians, ensuring that the next Net generation will have access to their own history and culture in the form that they can use. In 1976, then–secretary of state Gérard Pelletier announced a new museum policy for Canada. Museums would emerge from behind their ivy-draped walls to become dynamic providers of cultural content. He demanded that the policy be founded on the twin goals of decentralization and democratization. The Web allows us to democratize content. Government must agree to decentralize resources so that all institutions can contribute to the development of Canadian content in the medium of the twenty-first century.

Notes
1. The notice was issued following a 10-month review, to which 80 organizations contributed, and which received over 1,000 submissions.
2. To be fair, the CRTC is looking at Canadian content very broadly, and their brief is not only to defend content but also the producers of that content, to ensure that Canadian companies have a fair chance in the marketplace.
3. According to DomainStats, of the over 36 million registered domains, less than 1% (0.6%) are .ca (http://www.domainstats.com).
4. In 2001 the on-line population crossed the half billion milestone and on-line demographics began to increasingly reflect off-line realities. Significantly, native English speakers lost their dominance in 2001 and now represent approximately 45% of the on-line population” (United States Internet Council releases Third Annual Survey of Net Trends, November 12, 2001, URL: http://www.usic.org/pressreleases/111201.htm).
5. That it is desirable that the Canadian people should know as much as possible about their country, its history and traditions; and about their national life and common achievements . . .” From chapter 1 of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters & Sciences 1949-1951 (Massey Commission Report), 1951, National Library of Canada, http://www.nlc-bnc.ca/2/5/h5-406-e.html [November 23, 2001].
6. Users should be able to access, query, and print any book, magazine, newspaper, video, data item, or reference document, regardless of language and using speech, touch screen, or gestures.” (This vision statement is cached at http://www.google.com/search?q=cache:Xh7_cdzlDnQ:www.ul.cs.cmu.edu/+library&hl=en.) The current home page for the Universal Library (http://www.ulib.org) does not include this vision statement (November 23, 2001). The current statement says that “For the first time in history, all the significant literary, artistic, and scientific works of mankind can be digitally preserved and made freely available, in every corner of the world.”
7. A few examples. Early Canadiiana Online (http://www.canadiana.org), a collaborative project, makes available searchable facsimile editions of important texts related to the history of Canada. Canada’s Digital Collections (http://collections.ic.gc.ca) represents a fascinating collection of Canadian facts and images, though the content and presentation is uneven. The National Library of Canada (http://www.nlc-bnc.ca) provides excellent essays based on its exhibitions and research, as do the national museums. The National Gallery’s CyberMuse (http://cybermuse.gallery.ca/ng/) stands out in terms of an attractive database providing access to works of art. The Archives Association of British Columbia (http://www.aabc.bc.ca) and the Archives Society of Alberta have produced an excellent on-line image database, comprising in the case of British Columbia over 80,000 images. The Glenbow Museum in Calgary alone has contributed some 45,000 images to
the Alberta on-line database (http://www.glenbow.org). My own institution, the McCord Museum of Canadian History in Montreal, maintains a growing database of over 25,000 images from the Notman Photographic Archives (http://www.mccord-museum.qc.ca) [August 15, 2001].

8. There has been federal government acknowledgment in the January 2001 Throne Speech of the importance of digital content. Funds have been allocated to the National Library and Archives, to the creation by communities of digital collections, and to a Virtual Museum.

References


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