Online News at Canada’s National Public Broadcaster:
An Emerging Convergence

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Abstract: This paper retraces the genesis and evolution of Canada’s French public broadcaster’s foray into online news (OLN). It examines how Radio-Canada’s online news service has been integrated with radio and television newsrooms, how it contributes to expanding the public sphere, and the manner in which it differentiates itself from the competition. The paper concludes by reviewing the challenges facing the public broadcaster in an era where pressures for civic-minded journalism are engendering a set of participatory practices.

Résumé : Cet article retrace la genèse et l’évolution de la présence du radiodiffuseur public canadien francophone dans le secteur de l’information en ligne. On y analyse comment le service des informations en ligne de Radio-Canada s’est intégré aux salles de nouvelles de la radio et de la télévision, comment ce service contribue à élargir la sphère publique et ce qui le distingue de sa concurrence. L’article conclue en exposant quelques-uns des défis auxquels est confronté le radiodiffuseur public dans un contexte où les revendications pour un journalisme-citoyen plus engagé ouvrent la voie à un ensemble de pratiques à caractère participatif.

Keywords: Audience reception; Public broadcasting; Convergence; New media; Multimedia; Online news

Introduction
The technological tsunami that has hit every media enterprise since the mid-1990s has also significantly modified the ways in which Canada’s national public broadcaster fulfills its mandate of informing, enlightening, and entertaining listeners and viewers. The presence of Radio-Canada in the French-language quarters of cyberspace can be traced back to 1995. The broadcaster’s Web presence was launched more as an experimental project based on some in-house technology aficionados’ vision of what the Internet could do to extend the reach of radio and television content than as the result of a carefully laid-out strategic-development plan. Since then, Radio-Canada’s website has grown into the most popular
Internet destination for Canadian Francophones and one of the most credible and innovative providers of French content on the Web.

Like most other media units at the time, Radio-Canada approached its entry onto the World Wide Web tentatively and with a fair level of scepticism on the part of most journalists and management. The revolution that the Internet was promising in terms of access to information was seen by many as a disturbing development in an industry whose core competency rested on its proven capability to filter news for end users. Nonetheless, the pressures to “be there,” to colonize this newly discovered cyber-territory, to cater not only to Canadians, who were turning to the Internet in droves, but also to export the Canadian perspective to users all over the world combined to make the offering of content on the Web an obligatory extension of Radio-Canada’s mission. It promptly became a necessary service to a public whose expectations were growing rapidly.

Nowadays, with the proliferation of news and information available on the Web, one can legitimately question whether the magnitude of the public broadcaster’s investment in online news has contributed anything unique to this emerging field. There is no question that the Web has greatly expanded the supply of news and information of all kinds (Palser, 2002; 2003). Indeed search engines, despite their indispensable utility, are often perceived as capable of delivering nothing more than an abundance of redundancy. However, Internet users have taken greatly to the abridged coverage that news websites typically offer. In the online world, snippets of information abound, with full-fledged versions remaining the province of many traditional media.

Attributes of online news

Americans seem to give greater credence to CNN.com than CNN, to MSNBC.com than NBC News and to USA Today.com than USA Today. Lasica (2002) suggests that the explanation may lie in the fact that these news organizations have succeeded in transposing the might of their core qualifications—their credibility and trustworthiness—onto the Web, while capitalizing on some of the Internet’s main attributes. Lasica identifies four key Internet properties and the manners in which they help increase the value and usefulness of news sites:

- **instant access** and **convenience** turn consultation of news material into a 24/7 personal kiosk;
- their **non-linear** nature breaks away from the traditional broadcasting model and allows for multi-path explorations where users can call up stories of their own choosing and follow available links for further analysis, at their convenience;
- **authentication value** makes it possible for journalists to buttress the validity of their story by referring users directly to the source of information via the inclusion of hyperlinks; and
- **interactivity**, a much heralded characteristic of new media that still seems however to be essentially limited to users interacting with one another rather than engaging in a dialogue with journalists or newsmakers. Online chat
groups and forums have become prime venues for users to challenge stories and express alternative opinions.

In addition to these four aspects, online news (OLN) possesses a number of defining traits that set it well apart from traditional counterparts. Chief among them is the fact that OLN has neither the temporal nor the physical limitations of traditional media. News is constantly available, is often presented in a multimedia mode, and may allow for quick and efficient reference to archived versions of a given story. Increasingly, many commercial news organizations look on the latter function as an opportunity to levy users’ fees.

Although functionally different from its traditional-media cousins, most online journalism abides by the profession’s basic tenets: telling the truth and serving the public so people can make better informed decisions and ultimately contribute to social justice, equity, and balance. Where it does differ is in the technological platforms it uses to disseminate its content and the ensuing decisions it has to contend with. Deuze (2001) suggests that three attributes are particularly salient to the ways in which OLN sites structure their personality and attract audiences: multimediality, interactivity, and hypertextuality.

Multimediality refers to the format best suited to tell a given story on the Web. In its most common expression, multimediality consists of the aggregation of thematically related content taken from various traditional-media sources. Interactivity is defined as the various mechanisms by which users can engage in, respond to, and customize the stories they select. Deuze identifies three levels of interactivity: a) navigational: the most elementary form, where users can scroll from one page to the next; b) functional: where users can take advantage of “mail to” options and hyperlinking capabilities; and c) adaptive: where users participate in chatrooms and can customize content according to their preferences. Sites are said to be either “open,” when users can freely post messages and add their own material to a story, or “closed,” when their participation is subjected to an editorial filtering process. Hypertextuality refers to the level at which stories are connected to additional related material, including archives and other pertinent resources.

The way these various attributes play out on news sites can differ significantly from one news organization to another. The viability, credibility, and popularity of a news site is strongly dependent on its perceived ability to deliver the news in a timely and functional manner. As a result, OLN services face a recurring challenge in that they must constantly adapt to a host of digital innovations and make educated guesses as to their consumers’ likely reactions to them. Commenting on how new technologies impose a revision of the old models by which the gathering, production, delivery, and consumption of information are managed, King (2000) reports that at the British news agency Reuters, the profound transformation the news industry is undergoing is referred to as the “News Millennium.” It serves as a timely reminder that behind all the technological prowess modifying our information-seeking behaviour, quality content remains king, as the ultimate product that technology conveys to users. This issue remains uppermost as we examine the ways in which Radio-Canada, French Canada’s most
important media conglomerate, has integrated the Web into its stable of news and information venues. In so doing, we will see whether this development has brought about new journalistic practices in the ways the public broadcaster manages the circulation of information for, with, and among the users of http://radio-canada.ca/nouvelles.

The outsider within
Early in 1995, in the midst of technological euphoria, Radio-Canada sensed the urgency of accompanying the public in its migration into cyberspace. Backed by then CBC/Société Radio-Canada President Perrin Beatty, who was laying the foundation of his “constellation of services” strategy, Radio-Canada began experimenting with the Web. As low-profile, small-budgeted, and minimally staffed as it was at first, the mere fact that management recognized the merit of freeing resources to explore the promises of the Web brought the proverbial fox into the chicken coop. Not only at Radio-Canada, but in most newsrooms in the Western world, there was a strong suspicion that the arrival of the Web, ushered in by the ambiguous concept of media convergence, was nothing more than a ploy to produce more content while reducing the number of journalists. The introduction of the Internet at the BBC around the same time did nothing to alleviate these fears (Cottle, 1999). Many of the journalists involved were said to feel stress and unrest. “All of a sudden one has to keep the online counterpart in mind, master the new technology, learn the skills and be reflexive about what it means to the values and standards in journalism—not a small task for any professional” (Jenkins, 2001).

Over at Radio-Canada, the inception of the Internet project could not have come at a more inopportune time. The government had just decided to attack the national deficit by administering severe cuts throughout the public sector. Public broadcasting was not spared. A rampant, subtle feeling of hostility was developing within Radio-Canada as unionized journalists were questioning the coherence of the decision to release seasoned professionals at a time when substantial investments were being made in an unproven area. To add insult to injury, many of the new hires in the blossoming new media division had little if any journalistic experience, yet they had the responsibility of re-purposing radio and TV material and optimizing its pertinence on the new digital circuits. Their worth rested on the fact that they could package elements of radio and television programs into formats intended for a complementary, albeit different, type of audience.

Radio and television management were caught off-guard as they had to provide oversight for a new-media unit that was editing, cutting, and pasting programming content at such a pace that it was not always possible to secure the required approvals. In order to ease the malaise, a few senior journalists were assigned to the editorial desk of Radio-Canada’s news site. In addition to providing guidance to their younger colleagues, their job was to ensure that whatever was posted on the site followed the same codes and practices that radio and TV journalists adhered to. If the Web was to become a third antenna of the public broadcaster, it had to behave as such, particularly since the material that was
posted on the Web came directly from a “news basket” fed by the radio and television newsrooms.

One of the biggest threats that the Internet represented at the time, and which has since disappeared, was that of cannibalizing the two older media. It was feared, justifiably, that because the news site was free of any broadcasting schedule, it could release a story as soon as it broke. That apprehension quickly led to the establishment of an enduring journalistic principle at Radio-Canada: the OLN site exists first and foremost to support, promote, and extend the work done by radio and television journalists. Although it does produce some original online content, as we will examine shortly, Radio-Canada’s news site does not operate as a separate, autonomous entity. The synergy with which the various newsrooms currently operate prevents the news site from posting a story that the competition could in turn pick up and broadcast before Radio-Canada’s own radio and television networks have a chance to air it. The corporate priorities are clearly favouring the positioning of radio and television as the news leaders within French Canada, with the Web acting as a strong reinforcer of this message.

Co-operative convergence

The convergence mania that started in January 2000 with the historic AOL–Time Warner merger has had seismic repercussions on the Canadian mediascape (Attallah & Shade, 2003; Carr, 2003; Pitts, 2002). Many Canadian media executives viewed convergence as a godsend giving them the distribution apparatus required to reach a greater number of listeners, viewers, readers, and Internet users using fewer professional resources. The flip side was that from a journalistic perspective, many feared that this meshing of media under one entrepreneurial roof would lead to fewer stories getting covered (McCauley, Peterson, Artz, & Halleck, 2003; Anzur, 2001).

The best way to appreciate how Radio-Canada responded to the convergence phenomenon is by examining how the radio, television, and online newsrooms managed to retain their editorial independence from one another. Canada’s national public-broadcasting model of convergence is one of voluntary, co-operative arrangement between the radio, television, and Internet components, each operating under its own news directorate and totally independent from any central command desk—which has, for better or worse, become emblematic of all that is wrong with private industry’s convergence projects. Under the stewardship of its new president, Robert Rabinovitch, CBC/Radio-Canada truly began to manifest signs of functioning as a more-collaborative triumvirate. The assignment of bilingual journalists in hot-news regions of the world enabled the Corporation to cover a story on both its French- and English-language channels with the same budgetary allocation. For the Canadian public, being able to rely on a domestic perspective in the coverage of key international developments is one of the most tangible benefits that co-operative convergence can deliver. Another benefit became apparent recently when the all-news specialty channel of Radio-Canada and the OLN site began sharing a synchronous news ticker that appears simulta-
neously at the bottom of the TV screen and at the top of Radio-Canada’s homepage.

However, cooperation has its limitations, particularly when the stories covered are intended for three different media. We often forget that one of the fundamental precepts about media convergence is that a story that works well in one medium will not automatically be suitable for another. As mentioned, the OLN operation at Radio-Canada has, until recently, been essentially limited to the promotion and re-purposing of content elements derived from the various news, information, and current-affairs programs. The territorial rights expressed by both radio and television journalists, along with the uncertainty about what the Web could do to increase the scope of their program, created an uncomfortable situation. Senior management was adamant that the Internet would not become a third entity within CBC/Radio-Canada with its own discretionary budget and accountable to the two main media lines. To remove any doubts, the president promptly put Radio-Canada’s Vice-President of French Radio in charge of all new media initiatives at the Corporation, thus clearly sending the message that the Internet did indeed belong “under” the old media and was not to be considered on an equal footing with them or, God forbid, as an autonomous entity.

**Code of ethics**

Having clarified the organizational structure, the next challenge became the regulation of an emerging medium under the rules governing its forerunners. This regulation took on two specific dimensions: one dealing with the industry and the other with CBC/Radio-Canada.

In Canada, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) took a clear stance on the issue in 1999 by declaring that under the Broadcasting Act, the government would not regulate new-media activities on the Internet. The national regulator considered that “the majority of services [now] available on the Internet consist predominantly of alphanumeric text, and, therefore, do not fall within the scope of the Broadcasting Act and are thus outside the Commission’s jurisdiction. Among the services that also do not fall within the scope of the definition of broadcasting are those where the potential for user customization is significant, i.e., services where end-users have an individual, or one-on-one, experience and where they create their own uniquely tailored content. The Commission considers that these types of services do not involve the transmission of programs for reception by the public and are, therefore, not broadcasting” (CRTC, 1999).

Despite the *laissez-faire* policy of the government with regard to new-media regulations, the ascent of the OLN site as a cornerstone of Radio-Canada’s reputation as a credible, reliable, and impartial source of information brought to the fore the question of what ethical rules and standards would best apply to this new form of journalism. Clearly, journalists assigned to the online service were dealing with a peculiar challenge: how to balance the expectations of the online audience for up-to-the minute reports with the profession’s long-standing traditions of fairness, completeness, balance, and accuracy? Since the senior positions
of the online operation were held by experienced journalists who took it upon themselves to mentor the newcomers, policies regulating the news-site practices quickly reflected those already adopted in the radio and television newsrooms. As such, it was the Web that adapted to the code of ethics of Radio-Canada and to the basics tenets of journalism, rather than the other way around, save for a few modifications to take into account the idiosyncrasies of the medium.

Because of the nature of the Web, the editorial imperatives of online journalists take on a different dimension. Their challenge is not so much to decide whether a specific element of information will offend their readers or not, for example, but rather whether they should provide access to content that can potentially be seen as offensive (Kelly, 2000). The traditional gatekeeping role of a newsroom editor loosens somewhat on the Web. Since the activation of hyperlinks included in the body of an online text remains a discretionary decision, journalists are encouraged to provide as much additional information as possible, as the final decision to consult the links rests entirely in the hands of the user.

One can hardly replicate on the Web the entirety of the norms and principles that apply to radio and television journalism. Such a transposition would inevitably fail to acknowledge the specific media “grammar” that is being developed around the Internet experience. Although routine practices can be governed by written policies, the multimediality of the Web requires a more flexible approach, because “on-the-fly decisions require on-the-fly judgment” (Palser, 1999). Since OLN frequently gives rise to situations never encountered before in traditional journalism, news organizations’ internal guidelines and standards should be complemented with regular staff meetings where legal and ethical issues are debated.

Sound journalistic judgment is still the most valuable asset one can have in the information business.

Navigating websites leaves traces and greatly facilitates the collection of data, be it personal or aggregated. Radio-Canada has put in place a set of stringent policies and standards to protect users’ privacy and personal information. These are posted at the bottom of the homepage under the heading “Sécurité et confidentialité.” The policies are based on codes established by CSA International and are structured around 10 principles that are explained in lay terms. Access to the Corporation’s Privacy Coordinator is provided for cases where users feel that their privacy rights have been compromised.

Creating online content
Recent events on the world scene have highlighted the degree to which OLN has become engrained in the information-seeking behaviour of a significant portion of the population. Despite the profusion of information at their disposal, citizens continue to want some guidance to help them sift through the cacophony of voices to which they have access. Deuze (2001) suggests that the Internet gives rise to two broad types of journalism: instrumental journalism, which consists of providing information on subjects users are already familiar with; and orientational journalism, which opens up areas where users seek advice. A series of interviews
were conducted with key members of Radio-Canada’s news site to gain insight into how the public broadcaster carries out this dual task.

On any given day, Radio-Canada assigns a minimum of three journalists per work shift to update and feed its news site. One journalist covers the night shift so that the site is constantly refreshed and can cover international developments as they happen. The total pool of journalists working on the site is about 30, of which 12 are full-time. The rest are part-timers who put in two or three days a week. Every journalist who works on the news site has been through, at one time or another, the battery of qualifying tests that Radio-Canada and CBC administer in the selection of news staff. Seasoned journalists work side-by-side with recent graduates of programs such as communication and political sciences. Since there is little original content coming out of the online newsroom, it is imperative that journalists become quickly acquainted with the various news and current-affairs programs of the Corporation so that they can add value to the stories they are covering. It is by interconnecting a number of disparate program elements that all deal with a specific issue that OLN can truly claim to be engaging in a novel form of journalism. If, as Weaver contends (1998), one of the dominant trends in today’s news business is to rely on journalists to go further than just reporting facts by explaining and analyzing the intricacies at play in the coverage of complex issues, then the Radio-Canada news site possesses all the necessary requirements to fulfill these expectations. It is in the way these elements are assembled on the Web, along with what users make of them in their everyday practices, that a new form emerges. But to what extent does this occur?

First, regular users of Radio-Canada’s online news find themselves in a familiar environment in that the site has been offering a relatively stable “look and feel” template over the last few years. Story shells are used in the presentation of articles, which contributes to a sense of consistency while facilitating one’s navigation in an environment where news items are expected to change frequently. Although this format standardization can be equated to the jingle one hears at the top of the hour when Radio-Canada’s news programs come on—the “news sting,” in the vernacular of the trade—it seems that the Web should allow some variance, not so much in the template per se, but in the ways titles are laid out, the size and colour of the font used, the shape of the visuals displayed, et cetera. Such minor deviations could add a dynamic element to the site and help accentuate the relative importance of stories over and above their sheer ranking on the page.

Unlike with radio and television, where stories are covered by specific journalists who always indicate where they are reporting from, in addition to their name, online news at Radio-Canada is mostly faceless and location-less. On the face of it, this situation may appear to be counterintuitive, since much of Radio-Canada’s reputation rests on the credibility and expertise of its journalistic staff and as such should be played up on the news site. However, the manner in which news stories are constructed on the Web precludes it. Since they are typically an amalgamation of elements selected from the internal central news repository—called Inews—and as such are not the original product of the Web journalist, it
would be unethical for the latter to claim credit for it. In other news organizations, namely print-based ones where the website acts chiefly as a promotional as well as a revenue-generating vehicle for the flagship newspaper, journalists’ names appear under the story, since it is generally an exact replica of the print version. At Radio-Canada on the other hand, stories have different lives whether they are produced for a radio or a television broadcast. The e-journalist creates a Web adaptation of a story that extracts the best-suited elements from its sister media. From a purely journalistic standpoint, that product cannot be considered original. It is rather a compendium, a collage, of selective elements that have already been broadcast by radio and television colleagues. Over in the traditional media, these functions are typically executed by the desk editor, who fine-tunes the text submitted by journalists before it is released to the public.

Only the “De nos correspondants (DNC)” site area, as well as some temporary sites related to special events, deviate from this rule. In the DNC space, Radio-Canada’s twelve international TV and radio journalists contribute a regular column for the Web. Over the summer of 2003, special-events sites included those for the Formula One Grand Prix and the Tennis Masters of Canada in Montréal, where Web journalists were assigned to produce online-only content and commentaries. Occasionally online “Special Sections,” like the one that was created when it was announced that Montréal was losing the rights to host the 2004 Grand Prix, will get traditional media journalists to produce original commentaries that will only be available on the Web. Although modest at best, these initiatives nevertheless illustrate an inclination to bring some value-added content to the Web beyond the standard radio and television content.

One of the biggest fallacies about online news sites is the belief that they are interactive by virtue of the fact that users can pick and choose content according to their own needs and preferences. The fact that OLN can be interactive when, for example, users engage in a two-way exchange with either a journalist or another interested party, must not be confused with hyperselectivity, that is, the capacity to select from a wide range of content options, which is closer to the typical behaviour most users display when navigating their way through a news site. Not that interactivity is not possible. It is. But in most news sites’ current incarnations, interactivity has yet to take flight. Let us look more closely at some examples taken from Radio-Canada’s experience.

The so-called democratization of information enabled by the Internet is best illustrated by the presence of public forums. In the summer of 2003, there were some 30 forums on Radio-Canada’s site, the majority of which dealt with issues related to current events. As is predictable with a national public broadcaster, every forum is moderated and restricted to registered users in order to prevent inappropriate language and behaviour, as well as libel. A strict set of rules and user guidelines are in place. Although posted prominently on the homepage and frequently mentioned on the air in the context of specific programs, the cumulative traffic generated by the forums is abysmal, especially when measured against the 1.1 million visitors Radio-Canada.ca typically attracts in a month. Is it that...
the issues raised in the forums are not appealing enough? Or that the monitoring itself, performed three times a day, takes too long to clear messages and thus acts as a deterrent? Or that users who elect to participate in forums expect a better quality of feedback either from Radio-Canada or fellow users and feel that their needs to engage in dialogue are better met outside of mainstream media? There is no question that the rise of weblogs as a form of collective expression is proving to be a superior vehicle to galvanize those wishing to partake in social debates. Until Radio-Canada decides to assign full-time people to manage the traffic in its forums, it is unlikely that the latter will grow in popularity and become anything more than a feature on the site. Sporadic, part-time interactivity simply cannot work, least of all in a moderated environment. There are just too many non-interventionist alternatives out there. Radio-Canada would be well advised to re-examine its strategy if it ever wants to make a serious attempt at bona fide civic involvement.

But there is a silver lining shining in the interactive sky. To commemorate the first anniversary of 9-11, a mega chat was organized, where all the journalists who covered the story were available to share their experiences with the public. This five-hour marathon chat proved to be exceptionally popular with Web users. More importantly, the volume and depth of involvement served as a real eye-opener for many journalists and news program producers at Radio-Canada. Since that chat, many radio and television programs have increased their reliance on the public's contribution by soliciting comments and, most importantly, reacting to them on air. A small step perhaps, but nevertheless an encouraging omen that the Web can bring the public more closely into Radio-Canada's sacrosanct information cathedral. At the press conference announcing the new format of the 2003/04 television supper-hour news show, the anchor expressed his intention to solicit greater viewer involvement in the show by taking their questions into account when conducting interviews with the day's newsmakers. This wind of change is sparking the consideration of a number of bi- and even pluri-media undertakings in which Web users would play a much more active role in the nature, type, and form of information coverage and delivery in both radio and television programs. Convergence could take on a whole different meaning.

The multimedia quandary

The inclusion of multimedia components on Radio-Canada's online news site has delivered a few lessons of its own. Although the directive coming from above is to include as many audio and audiovisual clips as possible to give users the option of further exploring their interest, the fact is that this type of news construction is time-consuming, and the results are not always what one would expect them to be. As a rule, about one out of every five stories points to complementary clips. These assist in covering specific aspects of a story and in this sense help to expand both the depth and the scope of the written text.

The traffic generated by the activation of either audio or audiovisual clips clearly indicates that users are still very much turning to the OLN as a text-based resource that they can quickly scan and get the gist of what is going on in the
world. At Radio-Canada, hardly 10% of the overall visitors click on the radio and television excerpts. Three factors may explain these lackluster results. First, many people still do not have a high-speed connection and thus may feel that the downloading time required is not worth the wait. Second, of those who do have a broadband line, many may be displeased with the quality and size of the images delivered. Third, it could be that when needed, much multimedia content cannot be accessed because of server limitations. The soaring costs of bandwidth—to which Radio-Canada allocates some $30,000 a month—has forced the broadcaster to re-evaluate how far it is willing and capable to go with streaming. Although it has an optimal capacity of 100 megabytes/second, Radio-Canada.ca typically runs at 30 megabytes/second. This bandwidth is generally sufficient to handle both the regular traffic and the requests for streaming. On a typical day, some 650 users request a streamed signal from one of the two radio stations and the all-news specialty-television channel. When special events like provincial or federal elections, 9-11, London bombings, or the war in Iraq arise, the demand soars to such a degree that the server reaches its limits and any additional requests for access are denied. Faced with this situation, Radio-Canada has been forced to put a cap on the number of bandwidth-hungry streams available, so that the main site can remain operational for users who are satisfied with the text-only version. For domestic listeners and viewers this is a minor inconvenience. However, for international Web users and for Canadians accessing the site from abroad, Radio-Canada is developing a contingency plan that would allow them to get priority access.

The multimedia dimension of OLN does not only raise technical concerns. Much more problematic is what Kelly (2000) refers to as the “truth in linking” paradigm, whereby the embedding of external links can be construed as a form of endorsement on the part of news providers. To prevent any legal issues that this situation could potentially elicit and to protect the impartiality of its content, Radio-Canada displays a disclaimer on its site, as do most OLN operations, clearly stating that the public corporation is not responsible for the contents of external sites. In addition to concerns related to quality control, hyperlinking calls into question some basic responsibilities of e-journalism. In a study conducted on the OLN counterparts of such prominent American dailies as The Miami Herald, the Chicago Tribune, The New York Times, and the Los Angeles Times, Yelvington reports cases where more than 200 top-level links were proposed to users. As noble as the intent can be, such a gargantuan volume of references is actually having a perverse effect on the quality of information, because it significantly dilutes its value. Furthermore, it does very little to help the reader prioritize the relative value of the information available on the issue. As Yelvington (2001) remarks, “[P]eople come to us for news because they trust . . . our editorial judgment. That judgment is as much about leaving things out as putting them in, and we need to think about that as we tighten up our bloated presentations.”

Over at Radio-Canada, hyperlinking to external sites is a temperate practice. Over the years, the online news team has compiled a resident bank of a few-
hundred reliable sites, from which they select links when deemed relevant to the story covered. The emphasis ostensibly is on cross-referencing as much as possible with internal program links, thereby augmenting the visibility and profile of the Corporation’s radio and television news and current affairs content.

Archiving news
The collapse of the initial business model upon which a large number of Web projects were predicated has substantially modified how content is now being offered to users. The move from “free to fee” is slowly taking root, with the increasing migration of specialized, feature-rich, and archival material over to the pay sections of many commercial sites. It only stands to reason that private news and information providers attempt to drum up revenues from their primary resources. However, this strategic decision on the part of commercial news enterprises is helping to confirm Radio-Canada’s news site as a destination of choice, since not only is its content recognized as most reliable but, in addition, news stories going back as far as 1997 can be retrieved without cost. There is one limitation: the current generation of the search engine used does not allow one to retrieve all the audio and video clips associated with archived stories, a shortcoming that is being remedied. Nevertheless, the full text of the articles selected, along with accompanying pictures, allows users to retrace the evolution of a story over a period of time. The organic nature of news on Radio-Canada’s site constitutes in itself an interesting case study of how nimble electronic journalism can be.

In contrast to radio and television journalism, online news stories are always readily accessible and therefore open to the scrutiny of users, who expect to find updates to the details of a story as soon as they become available. This ostensibly creates an ethical tension, insofar as the journalist has to weigh the benefits of posting the latest details of a story as soon as he gets wind of them and in so doing increasing the informational value of his site against checking the validity of the facts and thus risking being scooped by the competition. The flexibility afforded by the Web brings about a whole new set of journalistic standards, as the dynamic nature of news can be witnessed first-hand by users.

The easiest way to tell a story on the Web is to constantly update the previous version as additional information becomes available. Although a perfectly appropriate approach to e-journalism, this method has one major drawback: it erases earlier accounts and thus does away with the history of the developmental stages of a story. The online news team at Radio-Canada has found a way around this quandary: cloning. By cloning a story, one fixes a given version judged to be meaningful and representative of the general climate at the time and starts again with a new generation to which fresh information is added. However, cloning is not a systematic procedure, which means that searching a news site will not necessarily provide access to every single version of a story originally posted over a period of time.

Cloning, as practical as it may be, raises a fundamental question related to revisionism: to what degree can a journalist go back and modify the content of a story without jeopardizing the integrity of news reporting? In the case of factual
discrepancies like the initial number of homes reported destroyed by a hurricane versus the official tally announced when all the security services have completed their evaluation, suppressing previous versions might not be seen as a serious breach of journalistic professionalism, although some might argue otherwise. In cases like natural disasters where stories evolve by the hour, it might be acceptable not to keep every posted version on record. The unwritten rule of thumb at Radio-Canada is that as soon as a story is judged to have significantly evolved during the course of a day, or if additional information affects the accuracy of information posted the day before, you clone. In order to do away with the inherent subjectivity of this practice, Radio-Canada is examining the feasibility of cloning the entire set of news posted on the site every 12 hours in order to keep an historical record of Canada’s vision of local, national, and world events.

Being a byproduct of its radio and television siblings does not prevent Radio-Canada’s new media division from making an original contribution to the role and mandate of the public broadcaster. Nowhere is this more visible than in the archives zone of the website. Thanks in large part to funding obtained from the Department of Canadian Heritage, Radio-Canada and CBC each created a site dedicated to making accessible on the Web, free of any access charge, archival documents about key events and people from Canada’s past. Conceived primarily for the educational community, these radio and TV archives are not simply a digital audiovisual library. Every clip selected comes with contextual material that helps situate the event within the perspective of the time. In the spring of 2003, there were approximately 250 different files available in French, representing over 3992 clips and 546 hours of accessible audiovisual documents. A similar volume of clips and audiovisual documents is available on the English CBC Archives site. Furthermore, over 165 pedagogical scenarios are available to help teachers exploit the full potential of those patrimonial capsules. In this sense, the combined CBC/Radio-Canada Archives sites constitute a concrete illustration of how the Internet can extend a public broadcaster’s mandate beyond the traditional radio and television frontiers.

The challenges ahead
Whereas the popularity of aggregator sites has grown considerably over the last few years in the English-speaking world, the impact has been much more subdued in French. As a result, the only substantive domestic competition for Radio-Canada’s OLN site has come from Cyberpresse.ca, the electronic companion to the La Presse daily, the second paper in importance in terms of circulation in French Canada, but first in terms of the credibility and variety of its news content and editorials. However, the presence of pay-content material on Cyberpresse—which charges $4 to retrieve an article from its collection of archives—as well as the almost exclusively text-based format of the information available, is proving to be a factor that helps raise Radio-Canada’s profile in the minds of Canadian and international French-speaking Web users. With the glut of OLN sites pushing the hard-money value of news content on the Web to near zero, it is hard to make a business case for pay-news ventures unless, of course, they can provide truly
unique content like exclusive video coverage of news stories or special sports statistics packages. It is doubtful at this juncture that Radio-Canada would consider offering such options.

The level of regional representation on Radio-Canada’s news site is a matter that must be addressed. Often accused of being too Montréal- and Québec-centric—close to 86% of Canada’s French speaking population resides in Québec (Statistics Canada, 2001)—a national public broadcaster has the obligation to provide the same quality and frequency of news on all the platforms that it uses to reach its audiences across the land. Understandably, the costs and benefits of managing 17 regional websites catering to an often scarcely populated constituency may be a questionable investment. This is what caused Radio-Canada to centralize its OLN desks in a few “super regions.” The next task is to optimize the availability of regional content on the Corporation’s sites. For starters, a personalized regional entry-point that combined local and national news items would be a much-needed improvement, further contributing to the public-service mandate of Radio-Canada.

There are signs that the essentially supportive role that the OLN site has played so far is about to become more proactive. Indeed, there are a number of projects aimed at giving the public a more active voice in determining the ways news and information content is treated on the main radio and television channels (Starr, 2002). Although gathering facts and reporting them remains the core business of Radio-Canada, there is a mounting recognition that the Web can contribute to shaping broader conversations and provide valuable contextual elements. The positive experience that a few flagship current-affairs radio and television programs have had with getting Web users to interact with program elements is about to be attempted on a grander scale. The new management of Radio-Canada television is committed to getting closer to the public, and the Web is perceived as the platform of choice to achieve this objective. Genuine Web-based public-interest journalism at Radio-Canada? Only time will tell. For the moment, however, it is clear that the civic potential of the Web is making tangible inroads into the ways Radio-Canada collects, selects, treats, disseminates, and keeps alive some of its informational content. Unquestionably, the talk-back function of the Web is creating converts and changing the way things are done at the public broadcaster.

Across the border, San Jose Mercury News journalist and columnist Dan Gillmor and Online Journalism Review senior editor J.D. Lasica are currently spearheading a crusade to bring listeners, viewers, readers, and Web users right into the news gathering and reporting processes via weblogs. As Gillmor confesses, “I take it for granted . . . that my readers know more than I do—and that this is a liberating, not threatening, fact of journalistic life” (2003). As such, operating in a converged and networked digital environment leaves responsible journalism no choice but to create content that interacts with its milieu and is not hindered by media platforms. Guay refers to this design as “hyperadaptivity” and contends that it compels journalism to distance itself from two defining principles of the trade: “distributing information under a single brand to get and keep a more
or less faceless audience and in doing so remain within the constraints of a single format (audio, video, text)” (Guay, 1995).

The challenge is not so much a technical one as a philosophical one. Radio-Canada is already present on a number of digital platforms and devices and its affiliation program helps channel the Corporation’s content to over a thousand company, association, and personal websites. In a typical month, some 60 million CBC and Radio-Canada news headlines are distributed for free to a host of digital devices. In terms of branding, new technologies are certainly playing a significant role in promoting the national public broadcaster’s image. With what technology allows today, becoming hyperadaptive could mean, for instance, allowing users to upload content of their own, adapting a site’s homepage to a user’s previous visit patterns, and organizing the information delivered according to individual preferences. Technically this can be realized with minimal pain. However, it is a tough balancing act, as OLN consumers seem to want it both ways. On the one hand, they rely on the expertise of professional news-gatherers and publishers to act as “infomediaries” and help them sort through the information maze on the Web. On the other, the growth of civic-minded journalism indicates a desire for users to act as their own publishers, participating in documenting what news they judge to be the most relevant. In this constantly advancing networked environment, how far can or should Radio-Canada go without going too far? On the Web, the status quo is hardly an option.

At the same time as our faith in the private sector’s ability to deliver impartial and objective information is critically tested, public broadcasting’s profile in French Canada is soaring. Independent journalism does have its privileges. Undoubtedly, Radio-Canada is striking a responsive chord with a large segment of the public. This trend should continue as the intricacies of the sociopolitical developments on the international scene demand increased explanation and contextualization.

Radio-Canada’s readiness to respond to the public’s desire to be part of the information equation bodes well for the future relevance of public-service broadcasting. In an environment marked by the continued expansion of the wireless Web and mobile peripherals, Radio-Canada has no choice but to accentuate the exploration of innovative ways to deliver information and interact with a new generation of information consumers. For the foreseeable future, online news sites must find a functional equilibrium between broadening the sheltered mindsets of newsroom professionals and empowering online users. Radio-Canada has the opportunity to lead the way and demonstrate the possibilities of contemporary public-service broadcasting for new-media users.

**Notes**

1. The Canadian public broadcasting service is composed of two separate entities: the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) and the Société Radio-Canada (Radio-Canada), each providing radio and television programming as well as new media content to their respective English-speaking and French-speaking audiences. CBC/Radio-Canada is run by a President and a Board of Directors.
2. Other than the radio, television, and new-media newsrooms, Radio-Canada has a specialty-information channel, le Réseau de l’information, which also has its own management team and journalists.

3. CSA stands for Canadian Standards Association (www.csa.ca), a not-for-profit membership-based association serving business, industry, government, and consumers in Canada and the global marketplace. CSA International operates in Canada and around the world to develop standards that address real needs, such as enhancing public safety and health, advancing the quality of life, helping to preserve the environment, and facilitating trade.

4. In April of 2003, for instance, 1,141,000 Francophones visited Radio-Canada.ca from their home, a 37% increase from April 2002. Source: ComScore Media Metrix Canada — Francophones.

References


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