

Canadian E-Government Sites: An Exploratory Study of the Political Dimensions of Disseminating Information

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ABSTRACT

This paper is based on a study of a selection of Canadian E-government sites, exploring the types of information and services they provide. We studied the political considerations affecting the nature of available information and services, and we used the results to draw an illuminating picture of the role of politics in the dissemination of information in Canada. While the Canadian government has been a pioneer in providing access to electronic information, political agendas and cultural/linguistic sensitivities have greatly hindered the implementation of bias-free policies for the dissemination of information.

Keywords: E-government, Electronic information dissemination, Canada.

INTRODUCTION

Like many other developed countries, Canada has placed high priority on communications and technology. In the age of the Internet and the proliferation of information services on the World Wide Web (Web), the Federal Government of Canada and all provincial governments have committed significant efforts to initiate services aimed at keeping Canadians informed about their governments and their activities. Chief among the governments' initiatives are Web sites that have been designed and implemented by different departments and agencies to function as around-the-clock information disseminators. The number of these sites has been growing steadily, and a parallel growth in the volume of information they provide is evident. Encouraged by the positive reaction of Canadians to the availability of this information and the convenience of accessing it on the Web, government departments have been moving towards making their Web sites comprehensive in coverage and friendly in

accessibility. Predictably, with the increased volume of information came the need for clear policies for content selection to satisfy the information needs of users and, at the same time, act within rules and regulations.

Presently, information is provided on many Canadian E-government sites in both official languages (English and French) to help citizens understand the structure of their government and benefit from its services. While the technology and the good intentions are there, the question to be asked is: Is it sufficient to provide government information based on the discretion of governments, or should citizens have a say in deciding what information is made available on E-governments sites regardless of political affiliations and directions?

The political dimensions of disseminating information constitute an issue that deserves attention and investigation. Does politics play a role in the dissemination of governmental electronic information, and how does this issue manifest itself in the Canadian landscape? Answering these questions is of crucial importance, especially considering that the wealth of electronic information generated by the government in Canada on the Web has put intricate and simple details of its services at the disposal of every Canadian from coast to coast.

METHODOLOGY

Is it possible for a government to offer bias-free information to its citizenry? One could argue that this is impossible, because governments are elected and they do all they can to remain in power, by focusing their services on the people who elected them and trying to persuade those who did not elect them. The information provided by governments tend to focus on accomplishments

and services that are deemed necessary to help and advance the well being of the population. On the hundreds of Web site developed by the Government of Canada, it is next to impossible to draw a comprehensive picture of the information being offered or excluded. Even more difficult is to conduct a exploratory study of all these sites. Therefore, for present purposes, a small sample (10 sites) was selected.

The selected sites constitute a representative sample of online information provided by the Government of Canada, and they give an idea of how this government selects and disseminate information.

First on the list is the main site of the Government of Canada [1]. "The Canada Site is the primary Internet portal for information on the Government of Canada, its programs, services, new initiatives and products, and for information about Canada." [2]

The second selected site advertises the services of the Bank of Canada [3], describing it as the bank with the responsibilities of managing inflation, securing the value of the currency, and efficient management of public money.

Canadian Heritage [4] is the third site maintained by a Government Department with the declared mission of maintaining "national policies and programs that promote Canadian content, foster cultural participation, active citizenship and participation in Canada's civic life, and strengthen connections among Canadians". [4]

The fourth site [5] is maintained by the Canadian Human Rights Commission. This Commission has a mandate to administer the Canadian Human Rights Act [6] and the Employment Equity Act [7], and to ensure that the principles of equal opportunity and non-discrimination are implemented in all areas of federal jurisdiction. [8]

Citizenship and Immigration Canada was selected as the fifth site [9], and it provides information on a Government Department that was established in 1994 to "...link immigration services with citizenship registration, to promote the unique ideals all Canadians share and to help build a stronger Canada." [10]

Sixth on the list of selected sites is the Elections Canada site [11]. Elections Canada is an agency that reports directly to Canada's Parliament. Main among its responsibilities is to ensure open and impartial process in elections and referendums.

A site [12] providing information on the Federal Court is seventh on the list. The Court "...is Canada's national trial court. It hears and decides legal disputes arising in the federal domain, including claims against the Government of Canada, civil suits in federally-regulated areas and challenges to the decisions of federal tribunals." [13]

The Department of National Defense's mission is to defend Canada, its interests and its values, while contributing to international peace and security. Its site [14] is eighth on our list.

Statistics Canada' site [15] is ninth on the list, providing information on one of the most active statistics agencies in the world. Statistics Canada produces statistics that help Canadians better understand their country—its population, resources, economy, society and culture." [16]

Veteran Affairs Canada provides services and benefits to respond to the needs of veterans and their families, and to keep the memory of their achievements and sacrifices alive for all fellow citizens [17]. Its site [17] is the last one of the selected sites.

RESULTS

For each of the 10 sites, a list of the information links on the main page was compiled. These links provides the visitor with a first look at what he or she should expect to see on a site, and they represent the type of information that is available. In general, links on the main pages are carefully selected to emphasize specific types of content and to help the government deliver its message. The links were subjectively examined and classified to establish whether if there was a potential political motive (political dimension) behind their inclusion.

Tables 1 through 10 list the links provided on the main pages of the 10 sites; a short description of each link, as provided on the site; whether the link has a political dimension (PD), or not (NPD); and if the question of political motive/dimension is not applicable (N/A).

Table 1. The Government of Canada

Link title	Description	PD	NPD	N/A
Prime Minister of Canada	Biographical information on the Prime minister and his vision for the country	Y		
Government Announcements	Provides additional information on national programs and services that have been advertised on television, in print, or on the radio	Y		
Government News	National news and information published by Government of Canada organizations	Y		
E-Forms and Services	Self explanatory		Y	
Government Contacts	E-mail, Telephone, In Person, Your MP (Member of Parliament)		Y	
What's new	Provides news releases, updates on programs and services, upcoming events and more from Government of Canada Web sites	Y		
Publications	Provides information and resources to help you find and order Government of Canada publications	Y		
About Government	Provides links to information on the structure and functions of the Government of Canada	Y		
Provinces and Territories	Contains links to the official government Web sites of Canada's provinces and territories			Y

Table 2. Bank of Canada

Link title	Description	PD	NPD	N/A
About the Bank	General information about the Bank, its Departments, and its management	Y		
Careers	Employment opportunities at the Bank, description of the work environment	Y		
Currency	A History of the Canadian Dollar, currency converter, currency museum		Y	
Financial Markets	Government securities auctions, interest rates, and news		Y	
Inflation	Data, background information, effects of inflation, agreement on the inflation-control target	Y		
Key Policy Rate	Announcements regarding the official rate		Y	
Webcasts (speeches)	A collection of speeches by the Governor of the Bank	Y		
Bank Videos	An easy way to learn about the Bank, security features of Canadian paper money			Y

Table 3. Canadian Heritage

Link title	Description	PD	NPD	N/A
Arts and Culture	Books, broadcasting, conservation, exhibitions, film and video, etc.		Y	
Citizenship and Identity	Aboriginal affairs, Canadian studies, official languages, symbols of Canada	Y		
Diversity and Multiculturalism	Anti-racism, human rights, women	Y		
Application Forms	Aboriginal programs, Canada Music Fund, and other programs			Y
Funding Programs	Guide to Canadian Heritage Financial Support Programs	Y		
Publications	Arts policy, heritage policy, sport Canada, trade and investment, etc.	Y		

Table 4. Canadian Human Rights Commission

Link title	Description	PD	NPD	N/A
Discrimination and Harassment	Equal opportunity to work and live without being hindered by discriminatory practices	Y		
Complaints	Resolving complaints of discrimination filed against federally regulated employers, unions and service providers	Y		
Alternative Dispute Resolution	Resolving disputes in ways other than going to court	Y		
Preventing Discrimination	Developing and conducting information programs to foster public understanding of the Canadian Human Rights Act	Y		
Media Room	News releases, speeches and newsletters.			Y
Publications	Publications, reports or other available materials		Y	
Legislation and Policies	The Commission prepares analytical reports, develops and recommends policies, strategies and tools	Y		

Table 5. Citizenship and Immigration Canada

Link title	Description	PD	NPD	N/A
About the Department	Meet the Minister, the Department, the Citizenship Commission, job opportunities	Y		
On-Line Services	E-client application status, change of address			Y
Visa Offices	Permanent Resident visas, applying for travel documents, nearest office		Y	
Choose Canada	To immigrate, study, work, and visit	Y		
Refugees	Refugee resettlement, asylum in Canada	Y		

Table 6. Elections Canada

Link title	Description	PD	NPD	N/A
Registration of Electors	The National Register of Electors is a database containing basic information – name, sex, date of birth and address of Canadians who are qualified to vote	Y		
Past Elections	Searchable database of information on past elections. Voter Turnout at Federal Elections and Referendums, 1867-2000	Y		
Election Financing	Information on contributions to candidates and political parties, their electoral expenses and the regulations concerning them	Y		
About Elections Canada	Mission statement, mandate, organizational chart, speeches	Y		
Information for you	Voters, young voters, media, political parties, candidates and Others	Y		
Electoral Districts	Voter Information Service, Canada's 308 Electoral Districts, redistribution of Electoral Districts, Transposition of Votes, Transposition of Population	Y		
Chief Electoral Officer of Canada	Find out all about who runs Canada's electoral process - who is the Chief Electoral Officer and how was he appointed?		Y	
Electoral Law and Policy	Information on electoral legislation and other related matters can be found here, along with details of research undertaken on electoral administration issues		Y	

Table 7. Federal Court

Link title	Description	PD	NPD	N/A
About the Court	History, biographies, jurisdiction, publications, statistics, registry, Law Clerk Program	Y		
Business	Hearings, proceedings queries, acts, assessment of costs, request for interpreter	Y		
Decisions	Different ways to access a database of Court decisions		Y	
Court Services	General business, disclosure statements, publications		Y	
Bulletins	News, notices to the profession, media, speeches		Y	

Table 8. National Defence

Link title	Description	PD	NPD	N/A
The Minister	reports, speeches, defence policy, Minister's office, biography	Y		
Operations	Current military operations	Y		
Key Documents	Self explanatory		Y	
History and Heritage	Archives, tradition, museums, publications			Y
Partners and Allies	International links	Y		
Priorities	People, defence spending, defending Canadian sovereignty	Y		

Table 9. Statistics Canada

Link title	Description	PD	NPD	N/A
Learning Resources	For students, teachers and postsecondary	Y		
About statistics Canada	Mission, employment, services, policies, directories	Y		
Census	Data and analysis, maps, recent releases, reference	Y		
Community Profiles	Cities, towns, villages, Indian reserves and Indian settlements, etc.		Y	
Our Products and Services	Catalogue of all products and services	Y	Y	

Table 10. Veteran Affairs Canada

Link title	Description	PD	NPD	N/A
The Minister	Biographical sketch of the Minister	Y		
Past Features	Archives of past activities dating back to 1999	Y		
Clients	Members of the Canadian Forces and Merchant Navy veterans who served in the First World War, the Second World War or the Korean War, certain civilians, survivors and dependents of military and civilian personnel	Y		
Providers & Professionals	government health care authorities, health care providers and research professionals		Y	
Youth & Educators	Educational resources and activities			Y

CONCLUSION

Although subjective in nature, this study, as presented in the results tables, showed that there were political dimensions for the dissemination of information on E-Government sites maintained by the Canadian federal Government. The inclusion of the majority of the links on the main pages of these sites could be argued to have been influenced by political considerations. There is no easy solution for this potential problem, but consulting Canadian citizens on the inclusion or exclusion information and services could be a good start.

Canada is one of best places to live in the World, and it has tremendous natural, economic and human resources. The Canadian Government controls the propagation of intellectual and informative wealth on its sites, and with that comes the responsibility of ensuring that access and opportunity be provided to Canadians of all walks of life. Social, linguistic, cultural, educational and geographical differences must not hinder the ability of citizens to take advantage of what the Government has to offer. The gradual disappearance of government employees as intermediaries between the citizen and information accentuates, now more than ever, the need to provide bias-free access to information. As a democratic society, Canada has to make a responsible use of the technology and set an example for other countries to follow in terms of politics-free use of E-government sites.

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