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D'Haenens, Leen

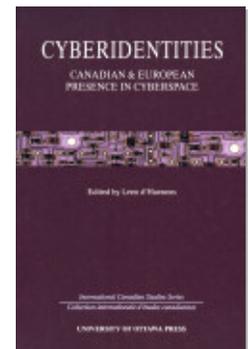
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BEYOND INFRASTRUCTURE: CANADIAN AND EUROPEAN IDENTITIES IN CYBERSPACE

by Leen d'HAENENS

The Canadian discourse is neither the American way nor the European way, but an oppositional culture trapped midway between economy and history. This is to say that the Canadian mind is that of the in-between: a restless oscillation between the pragmatic will to live at all costs of the Americans and a searing lament for that which has been suppressed by the modern, technical order. The essence of the Canadian intellectual condition is this: it is our fate by virtue of historical circumstance and geographical accident to be forever marginal to the "present-mindedness" of American culture (a society which specializing as it does in the public ethic of "instrumental activism" does not enjoy the recriminations of historical remembrance); (...) At work in the Canadian mind is, in fact a great and dynamic polarity between technology and culture, between economy and landscape. And this dialectical movement between the power of American empire and our bitter historical knowledge that the crisis has its origins much deeper in European culture is the gamble of the Canadian discourse on technology. (Kroker, 1984: 7-8)

What do car enthusiasts, compulsive hardware upgraders and gun nuts have in common? Aside from the fact that they are usually men, their respective fetishes confine them to a static world in which tools verge on the transcendental and their own selves become identified with the objects of their affections. Which can more or less be said of long-serving public servants as well... For all such people, the medium truly IS the message.

This book is an attempt to go beyond such mechanistic and conveniently reductive thinking, and face the fact that what is but a toy in the hands of a few can only come into its own as a potentially world-changing tool if access to it is both consensual and universal. In other words, people do not only need to know that the tools are out there – they need access to the tools and they also need to WANT to take advantage of them, which they only will do if they are allowed to see current uses for such tools, and to invent new ones as well.

So infrastructure is clearly not the focal point of this book. Although necessary, strong capital investment in infrastructure is not enough: if we are to reap the full benefits of the world's emerging cyberculture and take advantage of its major vehicle – the Internet – developing low-cost and widely accessible content, services, and applications must be a priority.

The EU minister conference in Bonn, July 1997, was attended by ministers and corporate figures, mostly from Europe, but also from the US, Japan and Canada. One thing everybody agreed on was that Europe is trailing far behind the US and Japan: North-American companies and governments spend twice as much money on information technology as their European counterparts. The Bonn partners are aiming to

bridge this gap. For the very first time a unanimous European position has been achieved in this field. I refer to the Bonn Declaration on the protection of data, electronic commerce, and penal liability related to Internet use. At the next such conference, worldwide agreements are expected to be discussed.

Ensuring that the Internet becomes a more accessible, more reliable, and self-regulating tool is a task that primarily falls to industry. Governments, on the other hand, can contribute to the education of “virtual citizens” and provide security and safety through regulation. In Europe, policy-making about the Internet remains largely incidental. Moreover there is no unanimity among EU member states concerning the regulation issue. The Netherlands and Germany do not favour special regulatory measures targeted at the Internet. Self-regulation is the keyword here: Internet providers can police their own sites and provide parents with the software tools they need to select or filter Web pages based on their views of what their children can and should not view. At the other end of the spectrum, countries such as France, Italy, and Belgium have strong regulatory instincts.

Interesting against this background is the fact that in the US the *Communications Decency Act*, passed on February 1996, was struck down in June 1997 by the Supreme Court, which deemed it incompatible with the First Amendment. The ruling states that Government should not interfere with Internet content, not even with a view to preventing children being exposed to porn, violence, or indecent language. It cannot be mere chance that only 4 days after the ruling, on July 1st, President Clinton introduced a far less controversial, and therefore safer text establishing a framework for worldwide electronic commerce while favouring limited government intervention and aiming at a harmonization of commercial rules.

Canadian policy options are often overshadowed by US positions. Nevertheless, Canada has a high *telecompetitiveness index* with regard to the US, Europe, and Japan – 7.6 per cent of its GNP already derives from trade in information technologies. Moreover, Canadian companies are often mistaken for US firms. To name a few, such Canadian companies as Cognos, Mitel, Newbridge, Hummingbird, Corel, and Nortel are all at the top in their respective fields. In and around Toronto, Ottawa, Montréal, and Vancouver (itself a city many Americans seem to think of as a suburb of Seattle), small and mid-size high-tech companies have been flourishing. While Canada has no Silicon Valley, one positive consequence is the fact that development costs are half as high there as in the US.

The computer departments of several Canadian universities have excellent reputation. The *University of Waterloo* seems to be Bill Gates’s absolute favourite, and many US companies regularly scour Canadian universities in search of the talent they need. The *University of Waterloo* has developed a co-op program to provide graduating students with four months of experience in industry while working on their research project.

Canada is facing the same problem as European countries: training and keeping qualified personnel. The biggest threat comes from California, where taxes are lower and salaries around 30% higher.

This book looks at Canada's policy options, since these can be usefully pondered by European Union officials. Apart from the necessary technical infrastructure, one cannot ignore the fact that the Information Highway's vitality will be directly dependent on the content on offer – we hardly need to point out that in the past many promising technological achievements disappeared because they failed to fire the imagination of the buying public. So, beyond financial and technological issues there is a need for basic principles governing content supply, such as the following: content should reflect the international diversity of perspectives and languages for the benefit of a majority of users. The emphasis in the supply must be on openness instead of concentration; on diversity rather than one single perspective.

What is on offer on the Information Highway should not be dictated by the G7 countries' narrow and often protectionist self-interest. According to the Canadian vision, what is interesting about the Information Highway has more to do with communication than information: this is the basic difference with the American stance, which emphasizes infrastructure and raw data sharing. Canadian government documents indicate that the World Wide Web should not be a mere hub regulating the flow of data crisscrossing the globe, but that it should be promoted as the meeting point for those various dynamic communities that make up McLuhan's global village – a space where creative minds cross-fertilize each other...

In accordance with its chosen cultural policy, it is the Canadian government's objective not to accept any expression of cultural hegemony or cultural monopoly on the Information Highway. Until now, a whole slew of governmental measures – financial compensations in film production and quota in radio and television – has contributed to the protection of Canada's cultural identity. These policy options, together with active support of local creative production, proved quite effective. The arrival of the Information Highway, however, is considered a potential threat. An initial, probably impulsive response could then be to clutch at the protective measures taken in the audio-visual sector and amplify them. Precisely because of the open character of the Information Highway, the question remains whether the options chosen by the Canadian government to protect Canadian culture (mostly in the field of radio and TV) will prove applicable and effective with regard to the Information Highway.

Because governments indeed do have a role to play still: above all they must strive to put to right the infrastructure situation, which is currently characterized by the emergence of mega-mergers among suppliers. Furthermore, governments must ensure that power, currently in the hands of a few, is better distributed among larger groups of actors.

Otherwise the only force in operation will be the market, which means that too many people may be left behind once and for all.

At least one government is determined to do something about it: the Canadian government has invested heavily, and successfully in technology to assist in the creation of a new style of government which is more concerned with values such as open access and strategic partnerships with industry, universities and other non-governmental organizations than with control and ownership. The Canadian government is taking steps to prevent the Information Highway from becoming a vehicle for cultural homogenization or an outlet for monopolies. Canadian policy makers want to make sure that their opinions on content issues are heard on the international scene, which means that Canadians may become more actively involved in the global co-ordination of the Information Highway. A lot of other regions, including the European Union, have also been looking for an approach which is more strategic and user-friendly. And most of them agree that the United States is never more aggressive in international matters than when it sees in them a means to boost its economy. What all parties really need to strive for is the establishment of a set of long-term, realistic and useful objectives: technology as a tool must be used to recognize and stimulate creative activities (so that anybody who wishes to produce and distribute new products and services, from electrical cars to electronic music, may do so), to make institutions more flexible, to eliminate market boundaries and expand horizons and perhaps – less realistically, but then the need is commensurate to the difficulty – ultimately to help draw humankind together (d'Haenens, 1999).

Canadians are already massively plugged in: 98.5 per cent of households have a phone; 95 per cent have access to cable TV; cellular services are available to 90 per cent of Canadians, and satellite services connect high arctic and remote Aboriginal communities. According to the Spring 1997 ACNielsen Canadian Internet Survey, over 30 per cent of Canadians are on-line: the amount of people aged 12 and over who are currently on-line in Canada amount to 8 million and this figure is growing at a rate of 50 per cent. Heavy users, who access the Internet on a daily basis, represent 35 per cent of Internet users, while frequent users, who log on at least once a week, account for 34 per cent and casual users, logging on less than once a week, represent 31 per cent. Further the survey finds that more females are joining the on-line community than males and that male dominance is gradually being reduced. Through the *SchoolNet* program 16,500 schools, 3,400 public libraries and 450 Aboriginal schools will be connected to the Internet by the end of 1998. The *Community Access Program* (CAP) will connect 5,000 rural or remote communities to the Internet by 2000. Other programs have been designed to help Canadians learn about, and take advantage of, Cyberspace. One such program is the *Student Connection Program*, which will hire 2,000 students over a three-year period to connect 50,000 small businesses and non-profit organizations to the Internet and train them in the use of business applications. The Information Highway Advisory Council

(IHAC) has made over 300 recommendations to the Government since its creation in 1994. More than 90 per cent have been, or are being, implemented.

This book's five sections shed light on initiatives taken by Canadian government and industry in order to provide "open access" in a wide variety of user contexts (community nets, freenets, school nets, intranets). Major issues discussed include: the role of Government, the role of the private sector and the place of the "virtual citizen." Of supplementary interest in the debate will be the extent to which Canada's IT initiatives can be adapted and implemented in a European – that is Flemish or Dutch – context.

In the first part, **Stationary Travelers?**, *Shubert* and *Kroetsch* show that cyberspace and the Information Highway can be approached in a metaphorical way: Shubert's parallel between the Trans Canada Highway and the Information Highway allows him to trace the spatial history of one of Canada's national icons and compare its development to that of the Information Highway. In so doing, the author asks whether the Trans Canada Highway will become the road less traveled, or simply one thoroughfare no one has any use for any more? Kroetsch also places emphasis on the notion of travel when dealing with the Information Highway: he sees the sequential delivery of bits of information as a narrative pattern in which users become involved in a manner similar to that of a conventional reader or traveler. Kroetsch wonders what other changes cyberspace has in store for us. He shapes his ideas around two of Aritha van Herk's most challenging texts: her novel, *No fixed Address*, and her "geografictione," *Places Far From Ellesmere*.

In part two, **Cyberlaw**, *Hamelink* explores the application of the international human rights regime to the governance of cyberspace. The proliferation of cyberspace technologies inevitably implies a confrontation with moral issues such as the unequal distribution of harm and benefit of applications among social actors; control over technology and its administration; and the uncertainty about the future impacts of technology. Looking into control over the Internet, *Garipis* confronts Internet use with legal rights and freedoms; which legitimate institution is entitled to regulate abuses deemed incompatible with the national public order? Should this regulatory institution be found on a national or international level? Or, put differently, can the notion of national public order justify *de facto* restrictions imposed to citizens of other States? *Van Eecke* looks into European initiatives in electronic commerce and the crucial need for legally accepted digital signatures within the Single Market. Issues at stake here are the legal recognition of digital signatures, the set-up of certification authorities, legal acceptance in the various EU member states as compared with guidelines for the introduction of digital signatures in Canada.

Part three, **Communities in Cyberspace**, starts off with *Roth's* article on the several ways in which Canada's First Peoples may gain equitable access to the Information Highway. Although distance is and remains a major obstacle, it can be made less

significant thanks to several recent projects and plans for extending the Information Highway into the North. *Leeuwis* investigates, irrespective of a given geographical context, the potential of electronic forms of debate in governmental policy processes and their advantages over conventional forms of debate. He concludes that electronic forms of debate may have various advantages over conventional forms. *Cobb* brings us back to the Canadian context with recent experience with two models of communities on the Net: SchoolNet and Community Access, in which through volunteer effort and limited government funding, schools across Canada are being linked in an enormous network. By 1999, 16,500 elementary and secondary schools will be linked through Internet connections. Community Access will create similar links between several thousands smaller rural and remote communities with populations larger than 400.

With the popularization of the Internet, discussion around forms of teledemocracy has gained a new lease of life. *Jankowski et al.* assess an experiment which took place in the Dutch province of North Brabant. Residents and interest groups were invited to participate in a month-long public debate conducted on an Internet site established for this purpose. More than a dozen interest groups and political parties contributed position statements related to the central issue of the debate: "Is space running out in North Brabant?" A research team monitored the personal assessments of the participants in this teledemocracy experiment.

In part four, **(Business) Opportunities on the Net – Case-studies**, *Haythornthwaite* sees computer-supported social networks (CSSNs) at the core of virtual communities, allowing for a wide variety of co-operative work and friendship relations, connecting workers within and between sites that are often physically dispersed. *Uyttendaele* promotes the use of the Internet and of electronic commerce for small and midsize businesses: accelerated introduction of information and communication technologies will stimulate economics growth and enable SMEs to become "virtual giants." Away from the business environment, *Edwards* describes the ways in which the Centre for Editing Early Canadian Texts (CEEECT) at Carleton University has been preparing scholarly editions of major works of early English-Canadian prose with the help of computers. The pros and cons of mounting these editions on the Internet are evaluated. At stake are the wish to protect both the integrity of the work of the authors and the reliability of the editions as well as the desire to distribute these as cheaply, conveniently and widely as possible.

Part five, **The Role of Government**, looks into some Internet-related initiatives taken by the Flemish, Québec, Canadian governments, as well as the European Commission. *Van Fleteren* points out that the Flemish government is determined to make Internet access available for the widest possible audience. From 1997 on, free access to the Internet was made available in all Flemish libraries, schools of higher education, and a first group of 150 secondary schools. In the medium term all primary and secondary schools will be connected. The most ambitious plan is Telenet Flanders, whose goal is

to convert the existing cable networks into an interactive broadband network which, apart from the existing broadcasting services, will also offer telephone, Internet access, and other multimedia services. The complete network overlay will be finished by 2002. Telenet Flanders already delivers fast Internet access in some areas and started with telephony services on January 1, 1998.

Proulx describes the intentions of the Québec government to assiduously pursue three essential objectives: (1) increasing the productivity of its own ministries and organisms; (2) supporting that part of the private sector interested in positioning itself on the world market for electronics (the government favours projects with pay-offs in the industrial environment as a whole rather than supporting projects that are exclusively aimed at the development of one particular firm); (3) supporting the production and on-line dissemination of contents and services in the French language (undoubtedly to be understood as an element of the Government's sovereignist project). On the other hand, the objectives concerning universal access and its integration in educational contexts seem to be long in coming. *Johnston & Faraqui* outline those areas in which further efforts are needed in order to fulfill the promise of a knowledge society in Canada. Government has a responsibility to take the lead role in developing this knowledge society by positioning itself as a model user of information and communications technologies. Access to the Information Highway is critical to Canada's future, as the economy becomes more dependent on information. Reinforcing Canadian sovereignty and protecting Canada's cultural identity continues to be a major public policy mandate. Thanks to information technology, there are now new ways to create, produce, market and distribute content. Sectoral areas such as health, education, and small business represent significant opportunities for the development of content, applications, and services. In each of these sectors, the potential benefits of the Information Highway are considerable. Finally, *Timmers* explores one crucial policy area for the European Commission within the context of the promotion of the Information Society: creating a framework which will encourage the sound development of electronic commerce.

This book is an offshoot of a conference (*Beyond Infrastructure. A Conference on Entrepreneurship, Communication and Culture*) held in Antwerp (September, 11-13, 1997) by the Association for Canadian Studies in the Netherlands and Flanders. The personal and professional support of a few special people has been especially important to me during the preparation of the conference and the compilation of this book. I have benefited from the advice and experience of the doyen of Canadian Studies in the Netherlands, Professor Cornelius Remie. My special thanks go to Robert Todd, Counselor in Communications and Culture at the Canadian Embassy in Brussels and Josiane Boone, Assistant for Academic Relations, whose support and expertise were invaluable for me.

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