Cyberidentities

D'Haenens, Leen

Published by University of Ottawa Press
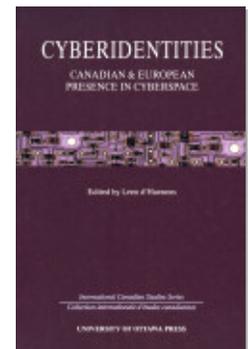
➡ For additional information about this book

https://muse.jhu.edu/book/6556

THE TRANS-CANADA HIGHWAY VS THE INFORMATION HIGHWAY: THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED?

by Irwin SHUBERT

I perceive communication to be the value of Canada, a state where understanding and misunderstanding, where constant negotiation and the limits of language, coexist. We have had to learn how to contact one another over an enormous land space, across five and a half time zones, in what was a wilderness of scattered settlements. Technology forges connections and disconnections here. (B.W. Powe, 1993)

Montréal. Monday, May 3, 1971. Steve and I leave on our cross-Canada odyssey that will take us from a quiet suburb of Montréal to the "exotic" West Coast and Vancouver. We have been planning this trip for over a year, poring over maps, plotting mileage and side trips, saving money, and trying to figure out if there will be room for my guitar in the already-too-packed back of my 1965 VW Bug. Our parents have spent the year worrying about two twenty-year-olds traveling the Trans-Canada highway in what Steve's father called a "death-trap on wheels." Granted, the car was nothing to look at, but it was mechanically sound even though the tires were suspect. I can remember quite vividly the looks on their faces as we pulled out of the driveway – our fathers' stern smiles seeming to say: "I wish I had done this at your age," our mothers' bold attempts not to convey the "I'll-never-see-them-again-look" – pointed the car west, and slowly eased our way onto the Trans Canada. First stop, North Bay.

Just east of Ottawa, for some still unknown reason, the radio just quit playing. We drove in silence for a few miles not wanting to acknowledge this omen of things to come – the words muttered by my father under his breath as we left reverberating louder and louder in our ears: "They won't make it past Ottawa" – then, spontaneously bursting into laughter, as if someone had just lifted this great curse off of our shoulders, we looked at each other and resolved, in the true bravado that only a twenty-year-old can muster: "Well, I guess we just had our first and last breakdown;" (this, of course was not to be the case) "Here's to the rest of the trip," Steve said, popping a *Grand Funk Railroad* tape into the eight-track, the speakers bursting with sound. The silence was broken, the radio forgotten. It was us and the highway, as we chugged our way west.

Ottawa. Thursday, May 5, 1994. The newly formed *Information Highway Advisory Council* (IHAC), holds its first of 15 monthly meetings to discuss a Canadian strategy for the information highway. The council was guided by three objectives: 1) creating jobs through innovation and investment in Canada; 2) reinforcing Canadian sovereignty and cultural identity; 3) ensuring universal access at reasonable cost; and five principles: 1) an interconnected and interoperable network of networks; 2) collaborative public and private sector development; 3) competition in facilities, products and services; 4) privacy protection and network security; 5) lifelong learning as a key design element of Canada's Information Highway (Information Highway Advisory Council, 1995).

The term itself: *Information Highway*, denotes the "advanced information and communications infrastructure that is essential for Canada's emerging information economy. Building on existing and planned communications networks, this infrastructure (...) will [link] Canadian homes, businesses, government and institutions to a wide range of interactive services from entertainment, education, cultural products and social services to data banks, computers, electronic commerce, banking and business services (Industry Canada, 1994).

So, what does a rite-of-passage trip across Canada 26 years ago have to do with the development and exponential growth of Canada's Information Highway? In a word, everything! Consider this: In 1971 there were 50,000 computers in the world. In 1997 there are 50,000 computers sold every day (Graham, 1993). In 1971 the Trans-Canada Highway was 9 years old, the last sections having been paved the previous year. In 1997 the Information Highway is approximately 26 years old, having cut its teeth on the Advanced Research Projects Agency network (ARPAnet, the precursor to the Internet), developed by the US Defense Department as a "fail-safe" communications network capable of surviving a nuclear attack.[1] At around the same time Steve and I, wide-eyed and naive, were discovering the *links* of the Trans Canada Highway, places like Blind River, Wawa, Indian Head, Swift Current, Salmon Arm, and Hope, places as diverse in geography as they are in people, the US government was creating their *links*, seemingly unconcerned about geography or people.

There has been much written to support the metaphor of the highway being used to describe this massive undertaking to "wire" the world. Headlines such as: "Information's brave new road," "Information highway or hypeway?" "300 rules of the road posted for high-tech highway," or, "The Information Highway – From Public Thoroughfare to Private Road," to name but a few, all serve to solidify in our minds the link between transportation and telecommunications. As the authors of *Getting Canada Online* state:

> There are both similarities and distinctions between traditional transportation systems and the I-way, the contemporary metaphorical equivalent. Both require substantial capital investment. Both provide a basic infrastructure for modern society. But the term "I-way," drawn from the more understandable transportation highway, is imprecise in several respects. First, I-way ownership will be less public, more private and more varied. Second, its creation will engage

---

[1] Although the *Internet* is actually a component of the *Information Highway*, the words have become interchangeable as descriptors for telecommunications technology. In this paper I will also use both terms to describe the same thing, understanding fully their distinctive differences, while acknowledging their common usage.

a substantial number of technological systems. Third, it will be interactive, with intelligence and flexibility. (Johnston & Handa, 1995)

While I would agree that the metaphor is flawed in some respects, I also have my doubts about the so-called "intelligence" of the "I-way." But, before we go on to examine other such prophetic announcements, a closer look at both highways is needed.

Attributing highway status to the light-speed communication systems criss-crossing the globe may be a relatively new phenomenon, but the idea of transportation as a means of communication is not. Marshall McLuhan (1965) broached the subject over thirty years ago in *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, in particular his chapter entitled "Roads and Paper Routes." Here McLuhan ruminates about the "speed-up" of transportation systems (roads, bridges, canals, sea routes, etc.), and their impact on cities and what economists refer to as the *center-margin* structure. As McLuhan writes:

> Great improvements in roads brought the city more and more to the country. The road became a substitute for the country by the time people began to talk about "taking a spin in the country." With superhighways the road became a wall between man and the country. Then came the stage of the highway as city, a city stretching continuously across the continent, dissolving all earlier cities into the sprawling aggregates that desolate their populations today. (1965: 94)

Falcon Lake, Manitoba. Thursday, May 6, 1971. Steve and I have spent the last three days crossing the province of Ontario. We have driven over 1,100 miles (this was a pre-metric trip!) and passed through more than 100 cities, towns, villages, and outposts. Although our grade-school geography classes and our trusty maps told us just how big the province was, none of this fully prepared us for the experience of driving across Ontario from border to border. At our campsite that night, in Whiteshell Provincial Park just west of the Ontario/Manitoba border, we retraced our route along the Ottawa River and over the top of Lake Superior. We babbled endlessly about the scenery and landmarks that we had passed, but saved our most fervent praise for the highway, each twist and turn unfolding new vistas, another Kodak moment. We realized how fortunate we were to be able to cross the country this way, familiarizing ourselves with places we had only heard about. As the miles clicked away, the highway infused us with a sense of awe; and of course, we had no idea at the time what a huge undertaking building this highway had been.

The Trans-Canada Highway is the longest national highway in the world. As if this fact were not significant enough, in *The Road Across Canada*, Edward McCourt (1965: 2) embellishes slightly when he writes: "No doubt we on this continent have always tended to exaggerate the importance of mere size; none the less, it is gratifying to know that the 5,000-mile Trans-Canada Highway is the longest continuous road on earth." McCourt's

trip across Canada was not the first. That distinction belongs to Thomas William Wilby who, along with his wife, "motored" across the country in 1912, taking 52 days as well as a few barges to complete the trip (Wilby, 1913). The first authentic crossing of Canada, in which all four wheels were in constant contact with the road, excluding of course the crossing of two oceans, was not until 1946 by one Brigadier R.A. Macfarlane. The official opening of the Trans-Canada Highway, the first all-weather road to link all of the provinces, came on June 30, 1962. This momentous occasion took place at Rogers Pass where highway crews had to literally blast their way through the Selkirk Mountains of British Columbia. It wasn't until 1970 that the highway was completely paved, and the final cost was over one billion dollars. The highway successfully surmounted two of the greatest barriers nature has flung across this nation: The Canadian Shield and The Rockies. Nearly 1,300,000 cubic yards of rock and dirt were displaced; 25 major bridges were constructed – one of them 200 meters long; the tunnel under the St. Lawrence River in Québec cost 75 million dollars and it is a little over one kilometer long; and, 31 (over 6.5 kilometers) snow-sheds had to be built over the highway through Rogers Pass to contend with avalanches and an annual snowfall of 15.2 meters.

It is not surprising, given the incredible feat of building this highway, that it quickly assumed the role of defining our nationalism. Then Prime Minister John Diefenbaker, who presided over the opening ceremonies, uttered these words (quoted in McCourt, 1965: 196): "This event has generated a renewed sense of national unity (...) It has brought about a sense of oneness from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean comparable to that which moved Canadians when the first transcontinental railway was completed (...) It is a day when another landmark is met and passed in the building of a strong Canadianism."

Ottawa. April, 1994. Industry Canada (1994: 8) publishes yet another paper on the Information Highway: *The Canadian Information Highway: Building Canada's Information and Communications Infrastructure.* In the chapter entitled, "National Vision and Strategy," the authors lay out their nationalist agenda:

> The goal for Canada is to build the highest-quality, lowest-cost information network in the world, in order to give all Canadians access to the employment, educational, investment, entertainment, health care and wealth-creating opportunities of the Information Age. In short, the vision is to make Canada number one in the world in the provision and utilization of the information highway, creating substantial economic, social and cultural advantage for all Canadians.

There is a difference, albeit a subtle one, between this vision of the Information Highway and the vision for the Trans-Canada Highway. The builders of the concrete road were simply trying to physically unite the nation from the Atlantic to the Pacific;

the builders of the fiber-optic road are competing with other nations to develop the best communications system in the world. The Information Highway's nationalism is being built by design, the Trans-Canada Highway's nationalism was built by default.

The amount of noise being created by Canada's newest national highway is deafening. Barely audible above the din of this traffic in information, are those who would dare to be skeptical about Canada's transformation into an "information" economy. Just what is an information economy? How does it differ from a manufacturing economy? What are the natural resources of an information economy, and are they different from those of a manufacturing one? Perhaps these questions are best left for economists to figure out, but I have always been struck by how quickly some people tend to forget that Canadians are still consumers of products, products made from raw materials that, although they may not be made in Canada anymore, are definitely being made somewhere. The long list of these consumer products includes the cars needed to travel the Trans-Canada Highway as well as the computers needed to travel the Information Highway.

While the car and the computer are both tangible products, their respective thoroughfares are very different. Roads, like the Trans-Canada Highway, are very visible components of the landscape. They take up a vast amount of space in their attempt to shorten distance, and their impact on cities has been monumental. On the other hand, telecommunications networks tend to be invisible, their impact on city landscapes only recently being explored. There is no denying that the Internet, as Stephen Graham (1997: 33) suggests in *Imagining Cities*, is "beginning to make telecommunications more visualizable," however, it has a ways to go before it is seen in the same light as Canada's roads and highways.

Rogers Pass. Friday, May 21, 1971. We were just approaching the summit of Rogers Pass, following the twisting road that seemed to be carved out of the rock beside us, when the "Bug" died. It was a slow death. The road was steep and the car started to lose speed. I kept down-shifting to compensate, but this had no effect and the car finally stalled as I steered to the side of the road. We were, as the cliché goes, in the middle of nowhere. Steve got out of the car to have a look at the engine – not because he knew how to fix it, but because it seemed like the thing to do – while I sat in the car looking at the maps wondering if this was the end of the line. For some reason we had taken to waving to truck drivers who passed us going the other way. Many of them responded in kind, perhaps thinking that they might know us, or, perhaps curious about the little black "Bug" with the Canadian flag attached to its aerial. In retrospect, I think we started this salute out of respect for these drivers who spent hour after hour traveling the highway, secretly envious of the trucker-bond and what it represented. In the end, it was one of these truck drivers that finally came to our rescue, but not before the car had somehow miraculously healed itself. We landed in Vancouver May 25, the first half of the trip over.

Vancouver. August 29, 1997. I now live in the city I first visited in 1971. I have traveled across Canada three times since that trip, each time being guided by the memories of that first voyage. The Trans-Canada Highway has improved tremendously since then, so too has the Information Highway. The headlines continue to herald the I-Way as the road to the future, and more and more people are spending their time plugged into their computers, traveling all over the world form the comfort of their homes. There are, of course, many benefits to this shrinking world and enhanced communication, but there are drawbacks as well. As far as Canada goes, time will tell if telecommunications technology will forge more "connections" than "disconnections." Perhaps McLuhan (1965: 105) had it right when he stated: "Our electric extensions of ourselves simply by-pass space and time, and create problems of human involvement and organization for which there is no precedent. We may yet yearn for the simple days of the automobile and the superhighway." As for myself, the next trip is in the works!