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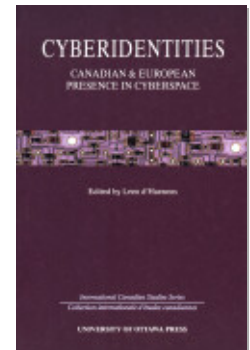
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QUÉBÉCOIS POLICY AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE INFORMATION HIGHWAY

by Serge PROULX

The purpose of this article is to describe the Québec government's position with regard to the Internet. Right away, I should emphasize that for the moment, despite its sovereigntist project, the Québec government remains a *provincial* government within the Canadian framework. That means that the government of Québec does not control the entire range of legal and regulatory instruments that would permit it to frame – at a national level, at least – the development of a technological network like the Internet. That said, from around 1995 the Québec government has demonstrated a definite interest in this type of technology and in the future prospects that it represents. The following will sketch out the broad directions of forthcoming policy based on the position statements and government actions undertaken in the last two years.

I MAIN THRUSTS OF QUÉBÉCOIS INFORMATION HIGHWAY POLICY

Following a report submitted to the Premier in July 1995 (*Comité consultatif sur l'autoroute de l'information*, 1995) – generally known as the Berlinguet report, and qualified by most observers as “techno-optimistic” to the point of lacking any critical distance – the government's first significant political act in the information highway sector was the creation, on August 2, 1995, of the *Secrétariat de l'autoroute de l'information* (SAI):

Its role: to define the government's orientations, elaborate a strategy for implementing the information highway in Québec and coordinate the strategy's execution with public and private partners.[...] The Québec government views as critical the development of the information highways. They contribute to modernizing the public apparatus and to improving the quality of services offered to citizens, to institutions and to businesses. Furthermore, the presence of a critical mass of content in French, useful at work, at school and in leisure, will undoubtedly favour the dissemination of our culture and language (Louise Beaudoin, Minister of Culture and Communications; our translation).

On April 2, 1996, the Secrétariat made public a working paper, entitled “Towards a Strategy for Implementing the Information Highway in Québec” (*Pour une stratégie de mise en oeuvre de l'autoroute de l'information au Québec*). This document presented the basic steps and approach proposed by the Secrétariat to the government of Québec for implementing the information highway:

The document establishes the objectives targeted, the principles to be respected and the goals to attain in the next three to five years. It also proposes the means

for action and an approach for concretizing the goals retained, with a view to favouring the deployment of the information highway in Québec. The basic orientations (that is to say the objectives targeted, the general principles and the goals retained), as well as the means, have been examined, expanded upon and accepted by the Council of Ministers (*Conseil des ministres*) and the Interministerial Committee on Information Technologies (*Comité interministériel sur les technologies de l'information*). As for the means of action, ministries and public bodies are now invited to evaluate their opportunity and feasibility in the framework of the preparation of their plan of action. They will also proceed to the establishment of other necessary means of action for concretizing the goals that were retained. These, as well as the results of the consultation carried out by the Secrétariat de l'autoroute de l'information, will be integrated into a Québécois strategy for implementing the information highway (*Secrétariat de l'autoroute de l'information*, 1996).

The document defines the special role of government in this area:

The State's objectives with regard to the deployment of the information highway should especially pursue the applications which will allow Québec to maintain its place among advanced, high-performing societies. Social, linguistic and cultural preoccupations and promotion of identity will mark out the path for economic development. In this context, the government will play the role of **catalyst**, of **regulator** and of **partner**. This role will be realized through the following actions:

- The **creation of a favourable environment** for eliminating obstacles, particularly legal and regulatory obstacles in the commercial sectors, and by developing awareness among the public and decision makers of the importance of new information and communication technologies.
- The **coupling of its strategies with those of businesses** providing infrastructures or services, in order to stabilize the rules of the game, to harmonize development, to adapt labour training programs and to reinforce investor confidence.
- An evolution towards a **model user** role, which will contribute to an improvement of productivity as well as to the rapid establishment of a critical mass of services and of an important francophone presence.
- The legal and regulatory interventions necessary to ensure that the deployment of the information highway contributes to **consolidating the gains of the Québécois society** and is **respectful of its fundamental values, of its culture and of its language**.
- **Financial support for particular structural initiatives** which facilitate the deployment of the information highway and accelerate its development and use by individuals, institutions and businesses (*Secrétariat de l'autoroute de l'information*, 1996).

Moreover,

the government of Québec is looking at six general objectives for the deployment of the information highway:

1. the economic and regional development of Québec;
2. the achievement of productivity gains in the government apparatus;
3. the dissemination of Québec and of Québécois expertise abroad;
4. better information for citizens, and services which are more user-friendly and better adapted to living and working conditions;
5. the improvement of education and social development;
6. the promotion of the French language and of the expression of the Québécois culture (*Secrétariat de l'autoroute de l'information*, 1996).

This strategic document lays out a number of steps for action. We may now review the list of 30 proposed targets (*Secrétariat de l'autoroute de l'information*, 1996).

These *targets* represent the medium-term and long-term results aimed at in the sectors which depend in part or in full on the government and which involve its responsibility. [...] The *areas of government action* with regard to the information highway are grouped together into seven areas:

1. services to the population;
2. business services;
3. government services and the modernization of the State apparatus;
4. language and culture and the promotion of Québec abroad;
5. education;
6. health and social services;
7. technology and infrastructures and their financing.

1.1 Services to the population

The three targets retained deal with:

1. access conditions to services;
2. security and privacy;
3. regional dynamics.

Access conditions to services: equivalence for everyone, everywhere

Target 1: Equivalent conditions (in terms of availability, of quality and of cost, taking into account the range in carriers) for access to services for all citizens, wherever they may be located within Québec's territory, with the help of a variety of access points adapted to their needs.

Security and privacy: towards a respect for fundamental values

Target 2: The capacity for each citizen to use the information highway without concern as to the protection of her or his private life and personal information, the confidentiality of her or his communications; the security of her or his transactions; and also respecting society's fundamental values as recognized by existing law.

Regional dynamics: remaining close to users

Target 3: The availability of services connected to the information and interests which represent local and regional collectivities.

1.2 Business services

Two targets were retained, dealing with:

1. the availability of adequate services across the entire territory;
2. the visibility of Québec businesses in the global market.

Availability of adequate services across the entire territory: universal, secure and planetary electronic commerce

Target 4: Widely adopted electronic commerce mechanisms, reaching all of Québec's businesses, operating securely and supported by open services, and consistent with international standards ensuring interoperability with foreign markets.

Visibility of Québec businesses in the global market

Québec's businesses should therefore invest in the virtual domain in order to establish new relationships with their customers and providers, to create new products, to open new markets, and to protect existing market share. A service providing research and access to Québec business sites, created as part of a "Québec" showcase, would bring together scattered forces from the ocean of information that is the Internet. Such a showcase could also be promoted by Québec's representatives in foreign countries and be accessible from their offices.

Target 5: The presence of Québec businesses on both international and local networks and their connection to strategic sources of information at the national and international levels.

1.3 Government services and the modernization of the State apparatus

Experiences from abroad reveal that modernizing public management procedures and administrative re-engineering allow better services to be provided with fewer resources. Technology provides viable solutions for policy problems and public finances. That is why organizational and technological modernization has become inseparable from the re-establishment of the State's financial health. Moreover, citizens' needs in the area of access to services have evolved noticeably, given the changes in their living conditions.

The same keywords are always in the background: access from everywhere, need-based scheduling, rapidity and trustworthiness.

Five targets have been retained, dealing with:

1. access to government information;
2. access to government services;
3. user-friendly access on demand;
4. training and awareness development among users;
5. transformation of the public sector into a model user.

Access to government information: anytime, anywhere

Target 6: Accessibility to government information of public interest across the entire territory and at all times (7 days a week, 24 hours a day).

Access to government services: the user's point of view

Target 7: Accessibility to commonly-used government services and the possibility of modulated transactions ranked according to the needs and constraints of users as to the sites, schedules and means of distribution.

User-friendly access on demand: a unified system

Users of government services should not be required to be familiar with the complex administrative apparatus of the State.

Target 8: User-friendly access to information and services, and simplification of exchanges and transactions thanks to a unified system for accessing, locating or transmitting commonly-used information.

Training and awareness development among users: counting on confidence

Users of government services will opt for telecomputing when it offers them direct benefits (increased accessibility) and indirect benefits (reduction of government spending).

Target 9: Generalized use of the services accessible on the information highway through information campaigns and sensitization to associated benefits.

Transformation of the public sector into a model user

Target 10: Transformation and modernization of the public apparatus through its openness to the entire range of electronic networks, the generalization of electronic mail, and the networking of ministries and public bodies, thus providing users of public services with electronic access to government information and to interactive services.

1.4 Language, culture and the promotion of Québec abroad

The information highway ignores linguistic, cultural or national boundaries. It should favour openness to the world and the expression of singular cultures, not the homogenization of content. It is necessary to act so that the information society is indeed diverse, plurilingual, and respectful of the values of Québec society. In the information society, French must take its rightful place.

In this context, the targets retained deal with:

1. French as a language for using the information highway;
2. the creation of original French-language content and the distribution of Québécois culture and artistic works;
3. the promotion of Québec abroad.

French, a language for using the information highway: through a critical mass of services and of content

[...] Globalization seems to give pride of place to English as an international language with a universal vocation. It is necessary to ensure that the deployment of the information highway also favours the presence of French and the flourishing of all languages and cultures.

Target 11: The existence of a critical mass of services and content in the French language.

Target 12: The presence of linguistic plurality on the information highway.

The creation of original French-language content and the distribution of Québécois culture and artistic works

Access to a significant amount of foreign content on the information highway is a boon for culture overall. Québécois culture must take its place on the information highway and contribute fully to the diversity of models and to the many forms of artistic expression. On the information highway as with existing modes of expression, the Québécois mind must not be subjugated to strictly commercial factors [...].

Even as we use communication instruments whose power and versatility would once have been inconceivable, it is necessary to mobilize the intelligence, sensitivity, know-how, creativity, intellectual curiosity and imagination of Québécois.

Target 13: The manifest presence of Québec's artistic and cultural milieus in the creation of multimedia content.

Target 14: Accessibility of Québec's cultural heritage and artistic works on the information highway.

The promotion of Québec abroad: tourism, know-how, Francophonie

Target 15: Worldwide access to information, reservations, transactions relating to tourist activities, attractions and products.

Target 16: Recognition on the international stage of a leading role for Québec on the information highway.

Target 17: Existence of an internal market among francophone countries favouring the creation, distribution and commercialization of French-language content on the information highway.

1.5 Education

The education sector will play a key role over the course of the changes engendered by new information and communication technologies. The State devotes a quarter of its budget to the education sector. Over one million people invest in their education each year.

[...] Pedagogy must therefore be rethought to take advantage of the added value of new technologies and to reach the highest levels of competence and widespread success. To this end, teachers should benefit from a new generation of instructional material, more open and better adapted to the new technological realities.

Decision makers at all levels should find the means to put these tools into the hands of students and their instructors, to ensure that the latter are trained rapidly, and to stimulate the creation of adequate pedagogic material.

[...] In this perspective, the targets will deal with:

1. students mastering the new technologies;
2. teaching personnel mastering the new technologies;
3. accessibility of training;
4. information for the population.

Students mastering the new technologies: equip and train

Target 18: The mastery, by primary and secondary students, of clearly defined competencies in the area of new information and communication technology use.

Teaching personnel mastering the new technologies: mastery, appropriation, integration

Target 19: The mastery and appropriation by teaching personnel of new information technologies and of information highway tools, their integration into the teaching process, and the creation of new pedagogic tools which, while reinforcing the learning process, integrate aspects of the information highway.

In order to attain this goal, teachers and instructors must themselves become model users of new technologies [...].

Accessibility of training: towards telelearning

Telelearning becomes possible with the help of the information highway, at a lower cost than that of traditional training [...].

Target 20: Accessibility for the many possibilities of continuing education and distance learning across the entire territory, especially with the help of tele-learning.

Information for the population: necessary data within easy reach

Youths and adults currently experience difficulties in finding out about the possibilities offered by the educational system. Yet the sums invested [...] to inform the population about services and programs are impressive.

Target 21: Accessibility of information and teleservices useful for the wide range of users and actors in the educational system.

1.6 Health care and social services

The health care and social services sector employs 10 percent of Québec's active workforce. Its Cdn\$13 billion budget (1995-1996) represents over 30 percent of government spending. It includes over 750 institutions as well as the many medical clinics and polyclinics and over 2,000 community organizations.

In order to take root in this sector, the information highway must take its particular context into account. Five phenomena should be underlined:

1. the evolution of needs related to an aging population and to new social problematics;
2. the accelerated development of biomedical technology;
3. the coexistence within the same network of underdevelopment in the area of information technology and the presence of carrier projects on customers;
4. cuts in financial resources devoted to this sector;
5. the necessary transformation of the health and social services network.

The targets retained in this sector should contribute to improving the health and welfare of the population, the accessibility and quality of user services, and efficiency in the use of socio-sanitary services, while better controlling program costs.

As a result, four targets have been retained. They deal with:

1. information for the population;
2. information networking;
3. service access mechanisms;
4. telediagnosics, telemedicine and teleservices.

Information for the population: increasing personal autonomy

Target 22: Accessibility of information in order to increase the autonomy of individuals and to improve their decision making related to their own health and welfare and to those of their dependents.

Information networking: better access, better management

Target 23: Information networking between users, health care professionals, institutions, and regional boards, in order to provide better access to services and better management of services.

Mechanisms for access to services: towards a secure health card

Target 24: A secure access mechanism for medical services, health services and social services.

Telediagnosics, telemedicine and teleservices: regional experiences

All citizens, including those who live in remote regions, have a right to the same quality of health and social services. [...] New technologies exist and they offer new avenues for the improvement of diagnostics, treatment, and other distance applications. Use should be made of them.

Target 25: The availability of services through telediagnosics, telemedicine and teleservices.

1.7 Technology, infrastructure and financing

Through its role as catalyst and regulator, the Québec government should contribute to the establishment of infrastructures, to their interconnection and to their optimal use. The government should also ensure the availability of services for everyone, everywhere, and security in communications and transactions. Finally, it should promote the emergence of a business dynamic likely to ensure the financing of the information highway by qualified businesses.

Technologies and infrastructures: availability, universality, security

The impact of the information highway in Québec depends on the speed and quality of its establishment [...].

Target 26: The availability of products, services and technologies able to support the information highway's development and to meet the expectations and needs of the population and specific customers.

Target 27: Networks and services whose standardization facilitates interoperability (communication among networks), portability of applications (i.e., using a single service on different technologies and equipment), and the export of products and services, while favouring the totality of electronic communications.

The generalization of electronic transactions will make an authentication system necessary to guarantee the confidentiality of communications and integrity of transactions for everyone. Opportunities for putting into place a mechanism attributing an *electronic signature* exclusive to each citizen will therefore need to be examined. This would spare service providers the trouble of developing their own identification systems.

Target 28: The existence of secure and universal access mechanisms to networks and to services for all citizens (avoiding an unnecessary proliferation of cards).

Target 29: An optimal use of infrastructures, present and future, through the generalization of their use, without limiting competition for services.

Financing: an inciting business dynamic

[...] In demonstrating its intention to become a *model user* of the information highway, the government of Québec will encourage investment in the Québec information highway. As a major client, the government will become an essential partner for infrastructure-owning businesses, and will be well positioned to emphasize its concern for universality and for accessibility.

Target 30: The availability of high-performance infrastructures to all Québécois, built, financed and operated by qualified businesses.

The government's role of model user for the information highway will require an **investment of public funds**. This financing will be established on a commercial basis linked to a productivity enhancement perspective. In certain cases, public support will be required, notably in areas related to societal and cultural objectives (*Secrétariat de l'autoroute de l'information*, 1996).

II COMMENTS ON THE GOVERNMENT'S POSITION AND ACTIONS

Actions taken by the Québec government since the publication of this consultative document demonstrate a certain coherence, even if a number of observers have criticized its bureaucratic tone and overly commercial orientation (Venne, 1997b). The document was presented to the Council of Ministers, which accepted both its basic thrusts and the approach it proposed for the establishment of the information highway. A Decree was then issued in order to confirm the government's willingness to act on this issue. Next, an Information Highway Finance Fund (*Fonds de financement de l'autoroute*) was created to finance various projects corresponding to the goals of the consultation paper for a two-year period. Each ministry and government body has from then on been preparing its own action plan. Elements from some of these plans have already been the object of public debate (for example: the "smart card" [*carte à puce*] of the *Régie de l'assurance-maladie*; the potential regulation of electronic signatures by the Ministry of Justice; the joint involvement of the *Commission de la santé et de la sécurité au travail*, and the *Caisse de dépôt et placement*, in the creation of an electronic commerce network).

We should bear in mind that the Québec government has stuck to three objectives which it considers essential: a) productivity increase in its own ministries and organizations; b) support for private industry to position itself in the world electronic market (the government tends to favour business projects that involve the entire range of the industrial environment, as opposed to those centered exclusively on the development of a particular enterprise); and c) undoubtedly because this is a political consideration intimately linked to the government's sovereigntist project, support for the production and on-line distribution of content and French-language services.

Meeting this last objective recently involved the action of the *Office de la langue française* (a government body whose responsibility it is to ensure the respect of Québec's laws concerning the use of the French language in the public sphere) with regard to an English-language business located on the island of Montréal. The business in question advertised the goods and services it offered on the Internet, but only in the English language, so that francophone consumers may well have been disadvantaged because they could not be served in French. The Office therefore decided to act and notified the enterprise of its responsibility to conform to Québec law. This gesture highlighted a contradiction linked to the transborder nature of the Internet: evidently, any business whose street address is outside of Québec's territory may offer its goods and services to Québecois consumers in English exclusively, and without risk. The *Office de la langue française's* action therefore raised an outcry in the international web-surfing community (notably within the network associated with the American magazine, *Wired*). This contradiction – between a national policy of cultural protection and the no-holds-barred dissemination of a cross-border technology – is nowhere near resolution.

On the other hand, the achievement of objectives concerning universal access to the net and implantation in the educational sphere are proceeding far more slowly. It is a fact that government reflection on the Internet's possibilities remains strongly coloured by a preoccupation with the development of digital industries, perhaps to the detriment of preoccupations more widely social, ethical and cultural. A public reflection on the stakes represented by cost structures for Internet use, for example, remains to be organized. Even if we are among the most privileged of Western countries at this level, thanks to the flat rate tariffs offered by North American telecommunications enterprises, subscription to servers and the use of a number of on-line services remain subject to a cost structure whose *raisons d'être* are not always clear.

As for the penetration of the Internet in the educational sphere, even if the government has expressed a clear wish to install and connect computers in schools (albeit in restricted numbers), the budgets available for upgrading computer skills among teachers are sadly lacking. We seem to lack the imagination to develop original strategies that would have a spillover effect in the training sector. It is true, of course, that a context of heavy budget cuts to the educational sector is hardly conducive to any sort of new initiative. Finally, investment in distance education and tele-information appears to be inadequate.

Parallel to the government's strategic approach, a Parliamentary Commission (formed by members of parliament from Québec's two major political parties) organized a public consultation on these questions during the fall of 1996. Its report was published at the end of May 1997. This commission's work was closely linked to social and ethical preoccupations, notably in its refusal to take for granted the urgency ascribed by promoters to set up the information highway as rapidly as possible. The members of parliament also took into account the fact that this technology will never be universally accessible as long as important parts of the population remain illiterate or the Internet remains inaccessible to the significant numbers of physically and mentally handicapped citizens. It is important that the apparent explosion of this new technology does not obscure the government's obligation to maintain a diversity of access to government information and services.

[...] the members of parliament advocate an approach which, while voluntary, is gradual. One which respects the rhythm of individuals, breaks ground with pilot projects, makes sure that children develop a critical sense towards the content they find there, does not listen to those who deny governments the right to combat undesirable content, and reinforces the protection of privacy and the rights of self-employed workers (Venne, 1997b; our translation).

The report is especially pertinent when it recommends that the texts of laws, regulations and other public documents be made freely available on the Internet (Venne, 1997a). In doing so, it takes a step towards a greater democratization that the Internet could help facilitate. It should be said, moreover, that the laws of Canada and those of the United States are already available in this manner. This recommendation also has consequences with regard to another important objective of the Québec government: to increase appreciably the proportion of French-language content on the Internet.

According to editorialist Michel Venne, the commission's report will remain nonetheless at a dead end, on two important dimensions: a) in contributing to a richer reflection on the consequences to democracy of implanting the information highway; and b) on the importance of the government's adopting "an information policy which would define the criteria of diffusion." That is, to try, for example, to distinguish between information which must remain secret and that which should become public, and accessible either free of charge or at cost. These two issues are obviously essential ones in regard to which many governments will sooner or later have to position themselves. In the final analysis, this raises the question of the pertinence of government intervention in the development and management of the Internet. But that is another debate...

III THE GLOBALIZATION OF MEDIA: TOWARDS NEW CITIZEN IDENTITIES?

A series of major changes in the cultural industries and the media world have occurred at a planetary level. I want to note the following in particular:

- a. The technological and economic convergence of the cultural industries of communication, of information and of media entertainment brings with it a hyper-competitiveness in the businesses concerned. This competitiveness is oriented towards the conquest of the largest markets possible: the apparent diversity of programming conceals a logic of cultural standardization dominated by commercial profitability. There is a hegemony of market logic in the circulation of cultural products at a planetary level.
- b. The development of international communication networks transforms the nature of crossborder exchanges (redefine time and space).
- c. The political role of the US appears determinant in the promotion of a “globalitarian” ideology. This ideology’s shape is *par excellence* the information highway establishment project at planetary level.
- d. The growing importance of contradictory crosscultural movements (standardization; affirmation; hybridization of local, regional and national cultures) speeds up tendencies towards indeterminacy regarding the future shape of social and political movements for articulating identities, even for the next decade.

In this context, it seems necessary to answer anew a host of questions in order to better understand the prerequisites for democratic communication at the global level:

- a. *National communication policies* are to be redefined in a new context of transnational regulation of global communication networks where the question of *democratization of communication* will become more and more critical.
- b. *Personal and collective identities* may be problematized by new cultural practices (mediated or not) that make simultaneous use of multiple poles of identity to create specific forms of social links.
- c. These identity shifts will be the source of a rearticulation of relations between the media and the construction of *new citizen identities*. Will we see a redefinition of a global public space from which a *new global public culture* would emerge? Or is this nothing more than a utopic idea?
- d. Between market and state logics, is there room for the development of alternative projects tied to the *logic of a global civil society*? Could we develop an alternative, global approach to the collective appropriation of information and communication technologies?

One hypothesis points to new forms of citizen identity and of public space to characterize the range of media practices demonstrated by users and by publics. These are emerging in a new context of global communication as much with the help of old media as with new technological means of information and communication. Marked by use habits linked to old media, confronted at once by multiple poles of identity and by new relations between the local, national and international poles, new citizen identities may form in this globalized mediascape.

The rearticulation between public and private spheres – today increasingly linked with the geopolitical development of communication – is summoned by a series of upheavals in the mediascape at many levels: political, technoeconomic, commercial and

sociocultural. It is in this repositioning of *private space* – to what extent should we preserve the privacy of individuals? – versus new *public spaces* – what shapes will citizens' new identities and forms of expression take? – that fundamental issues are raised. Can the globalization of media provoke a flowering of opportunities for the democratization of communications at the planetary level? Or will it, on the contrary, lead to the extinction of democratic virtualities?