Behind the Net:

HISTORY AND INTERNET USE AMONGST CANADIAN YOUTH

ABSTRACT

The article offers preliminary observations around the relationship between internet use and inquiry into the topic of history of Canada's youth. While calling for more research into the degree to which the internet either enhances or detracts from interest in history, the author contends that youth with internet access are more inclined to exhibit interest in knowledge about Canadian history than those without such access.

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Over the past few decades there is no question that advances in information technology have been the single most important consideration in learning and teaching. Access and availability to information on the internet has considerably enhanced student's capacity to collect information. Ongoing changes in the application of technologies have resulted in the need for adjustments by students and teachers alike in their acquisition and dissemination of information. According to a survey conducted for Industry Canada by the Media Awareness Network, students in Grade 10 and 11 prefer to use the internet over the library by a ten to one margin. Very often those who are more adept at using the technology are at an advantage in producing work in a variety of domains. Half of those surveyed say the internet makes no difference in the quality of their school work.

There is significant competition for space and time on the internet as we are bombarded with information and increasing efforts are directed at reaching users.

That which follows will focus on the extent to which younger Canadians express interest in accessing history related materials online. Issues arising from internet access and the degree to which it is used to learn about history will be considered. Data from a 2004 survey commissioned by the federal government will be employed to provide some partial insights into the link between internet use and interest in history. This is the beginning of a research project on the issue which ultimately seeks to develop a profile of those Canadians that are interested in history. By identifying the particular characteristics of such individuals it may help determine what works best in reaching Canadians in this subject area. So as to situate history in some comparative context, access to other disciplines is considered. The findings are broken down between early and late teen respondents to determine whether interest in history is influenced by age.

Interest access does not appear to diminish interest in learning about Canada and in fact those with such access are more inclined to indicate a desire to acquire such knowledge. Some 78% of those surveyed between the ages of 12 and 15 with internet access express a desire to learn more about Canada (rating 7-10) versus approximately 68% of those in the same age group that demonstrate similar interest but do not have access to the internet.

Table 1

Please tell me whether you agree/disagree with: 1) I am interested in learning more about Canada, its history, geography, people and institutions?

12-15 years of age	have access to the Internet	Do not have access to the Internet
1-3 disagree	10	1
4-6 Neutral	66	16
7-10 agree	271	37
Total	347	54

Source: Ipsos-Reconnecting Government with Youth, Department of Canadian Heritage, 2004

In the 16-21 cohort, some 70% of those with internet access report an interest in learning more about Canada versus some 68% that do not have access.

Table 2

Please tell me whether you agree/disagree with: 1) I am interested in learning more about Canada, its history, geography, people and institutions?

16-21	have access to the Internet	Do not have access to the Internet
1-3 disagree	33	3
4-6	135	13
7-10	394	34
Total	562	50

Source: Ipsos-Reconnecting Government with Youth, Department of Canadian Heritage, 2004

While access may appear to enhance interest in Canada, the desire to acquire such knowledge seemingly varies according to the amount of time spent on the internet. For purposes of this study we have divided the internet use into low (less than 5 hours per week), moderate (5-10 hours per week) and high (more than 10 hours per week) consumers of this medium. Amongst low internet users in the 12-15 age category, some 85% say they are interested in learning more about Canada. The share drops amongst the moderate internet users and then rises slightly for high internet users. In the 16-21 cohort the gap narrows across the age cohorts as regards to being interested in learning more about Canada.

Table 3

Please tell me whether you agree: I am interested in learning more about Canada, its history, geography, people and institutions (in percentage)? On average, how many hours per week do you use the Internet?

	12-15	16-21
Less than 5	85.4	72.3
5-10	70.7	67.2
More than 10	75.0	70.7

Source: Ipsos-Reconnecting Government with Youth, Department of Canadian Heritage, 2004

As observed below, of those youth between the ages of 12 and 15 that have access, some two-thirds say they are likely to look up things on history on the internet. In the next cohort (16-21) they are somewhat less likely to look up historical matters on the internet (62.4%). The likelihood of looking up a historic topic on the internet is greater than it is for Parks and Geography. Moreover there is a drop-off in such inquires between the 12-15 and 6-21 cohorts which as in the case of history is likely explained by the requirements of school curriculum on the students. The extent to which youth look for science and technology is similar to the degree to which history is sought online. Not surprisingly of the four areas examined here, it is arts, sports and leisure that are the object of most attention by youth in internet inquiries. It is worth noting that the 12-15 year old respondents are more inclined to say that it is very likely they will look up arts, sports and leisure than the 16-21 age cohort

Table 4

How likely you would be to look the following on the Internet: History, Parks & Geography (12-15 and 16-21 years of age)

	12-15		16-21	
	Very Likely	Somewhat Likely	Very Likely	Somewhat Likely
History	26.8	40.5	21.1	41.3
Parks & Geography	11.7	42.5	10.8	37.0
Science & Technology	27.0	40.3	22.9	42.9
Arts Sports & Leisure	50.2	36.9	39.7	40.6

Source: Ipsos-Reconnecting Government with Youth, Department of Canadian Heritage, 2004

Does the degree of internet use influence the likelihood of looking up history? As observed below, those who spend less time on the net-the lower users-are more likely to look up history in the 12-15 cohort than the high users of internet in that age group. In the 16-21 cohorts however, the gap is significantly modified with low and high users equally likely to look up history on the internet and the moderate users slightly more inclined to do so. By comparison looking up arts, sports and leisure is also more common amongst the low users in the 12-15 age cohorts than the moderate to high consumers. However, the pattern is reversed in the 16-21 cohorts with low users being less inclined than high users to look up arts, sports and leisure on the internet

Table 5

How likely you would be to look it up on the Internet: History, Parks & Geography (12-15 and 16-21 years of age)

	History		Arts Sports & Leisure	
Age	12-15	16-21	12-15	16-21
Less than 5	77.3	60.3	92.3	76.1
5-10	70.5	66.0	86.3	78.9
More than 10	60.0	60.9	84.0	85.7

Source: Ipsos-Reconnecting Government with Youth, Department of Canadian Heritage, 2004

Conclusion

There remain important questions around the best way to disseminate historic material on the internet and the relative space the discipline occupies amongst Canada's youth. Schools are the principal body in directing students to historical research and thus getting them to make their queries on the internet. With the survey data some preliminary observations were made about the possible influence of internet use on interest and inquiry into history and other areas. The data raises several questions about the profile of individuals that are interested in history and whether other identity and demographic considerations influence such choices. Further research is necessary to determine the most effective strategies to enhance youth interest in history and carve out a dynamic place for it on the internet.