SHARING OUR HISTORY IN THE DIGITAL ERA: TREMENDOUS TRIUMPHS AND CLEAR CAVEATS

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In the 1980s, the great philanthropist Charles Bronfman became concerned that young Canadians lacked sufficient knowledge and appreciation of their country. As he wrote in an email several years ago: "No society can be of merit unless it has heroines, heroes and myths. In Canada, while there were many, they had not been taught." So, in 1991, Charles financed and helped create one of the first products of a meeting of technology and history — the *Heritage Minutes*. In the 27 years since then, the 60-second vignettes, with their stories of people and events that have shaped our country's development, have created catchphrases ("I smell burnt toast" from the Dr. Wilder Penfield story), spawned many parodies – and educated millions of Canadians about events, both good and bad, with which they had not previously been familiar.

If ever there was a program designed for the modern Internet era — where audience attention is fleeting and viewing options are unlimited — it is the *Minutes*. There has never been a better tool for disseminating information than the Internet. That quality means that we sometimes overlook the potential dangers that arise when we presume too much on its virtues, and universality.

Let's consider both strengths and weaknesses, starting with the former. First, it's essential to be wary of misplaced nostalgia. That means challenging the assumption of some that Canadians were more aware and engaged with history when there were fewer sources of information prior to the Internet's advent. Case studies to the contrary include two programs run by Historica Canada. First, the *Minutes*: when they were launched in the

early 1990s, they were generally available only on television (at unscheduled times.) Today, they still show on television (more than 116,000 times altogether in 2016), but most of their audience is now online. Last year, they were seen more than *seven million* times online. Our most recent Minute, on Ontario/B.C. gay activist Jim Egan's fight for same-sex benefits, was viewed more than 2.5 million times in the first 30 days of release. Unlike on television, the *Minutes* can now be seen instantly at any time with the click of a mouse – and the person watching them is doing so by conscious choice. They're also available on social media with closed captioning – as opposed to earlier days.

The second example is, in fact, even bigger than the *Minutes* in overall use. When *The Canadian Encyclopedia* was created by publisher Mel Hurtig and editor James Marsh in the mid-1980s, it was a print sensation. It sold more than 300,000 copies, and received enormous media acclaim. Today, in online form, it draws a much quieter reception — but is far bigger in terms of regular use. In the last year, it was visited by over 12 million unique users, many of them students — and this year will reach more than 14 million. Unlike a print publication, which can contain outdated material literally the moment it is released, the online Encyclopedia is updated daily by our team of seven fulltime editors and hundreds of freelancers across Canada. And — a major distinction here — when the first print version of the Encyclopedia was published in 1985, it cost $125. That was a justifiable price given its size and scale, but it was also unaffordable for many people. Today, the online Encyclopedia is free to all, in both official languages.

Despite all the recent debate over "fake news", most people will surely concede that the Internet, used carefully with an eye to reputable sources, is a hugely positive source in democratizing the dissemination of information. At the recent conference on Technology, Memory and History co-sponsored by the Association for Canadian Studies and Historica, Guy Berthiaume, the National Librarian and Archivist, reminded us that only a few decades ago, access to the archives was restricted to a very select group of qualified Canadians. Today, most of its material is available to anyone at a computer. That is just one reflection of the way in which, for the first time in history, vast troves of information are open to anyone with Internet access.

And yet… the last part of the last sentence is key, because large swaths of our country are still deprived of its full use. Access to the Internet — meaning, specifically, minimal standards of at least 50 megabits per second download and 10MBps upload — remains limited in Canada. Rural and remote communities — where need is arguably the greatest because of their isolation — suffer the most. Despite statements of support from successive federal and provincial governments, there is still no clear federal strategy to establish timelines for bringing broadband access to those communities (including many Indigenous communities). One likely reason is price: according to a report by the federal auditor general released in November, the cost of meeting those minimal standards on a countrywide basis would likely start at $6.5 billion.

That's not an easy amount of money for any government to absorb. But according to the 2011 census, almost one in five (18.9%) Canadians live in rural areas. In an era in which access to instant, accurate information is increasingly a pre-condition

to making almost any sort of important decision, those people are at an immediate and significant disadvantage. That includes the 17% of residents of rural and remote communities who are between the ages of 15 and 29. One immediate consequence: if they want to learn more about the world in which they live, the easiest option is to head to a big city – as many do. As that happens in increasing numbers, rural communities, in which about 80% of Canadians lived at the time of Confederation, die off. An important part of our heritage disappears.

The absence of Internet access is also a problem that extends beyond rural and remote communities. The number of schools offering regular access to the Internet for teaching purposes remains surprisingly low. In 2017, our organization sent out an online survey to a database-generated sample of permanent, long-term and substitute teachers across Canada. More than 1,000 teachers responded. Among the findings, 23% said their students use computers during class time every day; 34% said they did so "a few times a week"; 13% answered "occasionally"; nine per cent said "only in specialized classes and courses"; and four per cent said "never". The reasons for limited use include cost of both hardware and Internet usage, and concerns over monitoring the forms of usage by students.

What's the solution for an organization such as ours, where we try our hardest to live up to our commitment to bring awareness of history – for free – to all Canadians, and, especially, students? For one, our survey showed that 53% of teacher respondents use downloadable lesson plans and learning tools – so we now put a greater focus on producing those. As for students and others with very limited Internet service, the answer lies in going back in time in terms of the tools we offer. While we redesigned the Encyclopedia earlier this year to make it easier to use on small-screen mobile phones, it can still be used (in stripped-down form) on dial-up Internet. In addition to posting our *Minutes* online for free, the collection is available via DVD. Our downloadable educational material, such as our Indigenous History timeline and content tied to Black History Month, is available in print as well as online.

And so on. The challenge is that producing hard copy material in print, or on DVD, costs per capita many times the expense of our Internet-based offerings in order to reach a much smaller group of people. As a non-profit organization, that's an added expense that we would be delighted to be able to eliminate – but only when Internet access is genuinely available to all.

Finally, as we often say within our organization, a historical event only happens once, but it can be re-told and interpreted in infinite ways. As attention spans shorten and cynicism over what is "fact" increases, the definition of "history" is increasingly a moving target. In many ways, that's healthy. Nations, like people, improve when they are self-confident enough to acknowledge failings as well as strengths. Canada, as blessed as we are in so many ways, has its share of dark moments, as well. The vast array of material on the Internet reflects this dichotomy and magnifies the volume of every debate. That is both its greatest strength — and weakness. As our dependence on technology grows, the same becomes true of us.