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Using the Web for Canadian history projects: What will children find?

Abstract: Children are using the Web to meet their information needs in growing numbers. A 2001 study by the Media Awareness Network, entitled *Young Canadians in a Wired World: The Students' View*, found that Internet use by Canadian youth aged nine to 17 is widespread - 99% reported they had access to the Internet. The study found that surfing Internet web sites topped the list of ways Canadian youth look for information. Seen through the eyes of students, the Internet is a legitimate and indeed, a primary resource for information. As information scientists, much of our focus is on the accessibility of this information. We design better retrieval tools in order to open the doors to information available on the Web. But, given the importance for students of information found on the Internet, we should also ask, once found, what is the nature of this information and how will it affect the way children use it? The authors address this question, focusing on web-based information within the knowledge domain of Canadian history, a topic driven by a larger research project aimed at designing a Canadian history portal for Grade 6 students, ages 11 to 12 years old, and building a database for testing it. (The data base includes approximately 1000 web pages, in both French and English).

In this paper we use three perspectives to evaluate existing web pages relevant to grade-six students seeking information about Canadian history:

- traditional evaluation criteria,
- usability and design issues and,
- knowledge representation issues.

Traditionally, information professionals have assessed information using authority, reliability, and currency. When assessed by these criteria many of the pages were found wanting. As regards usability and design issues, we investigate navigation, graphic design and readability with an eye to age-appropriateness. The extent to which these issues were successfully addressed tended to vary according to the organization responsible for the web site. We look at knowledge representation through the lens of interaction and interpretation. The levels of interaction found in Web pages ranged from passive to active, with textual entries in online encyclopedias presenting knowledge in a static format, while "interactive episodes", such as online games, requiring users to interact with the system to gain meaning from the content. Digital archives and museums offer images of historical artifacts, the context of which require interpretation. The intensity of interaction and interpretation suggest that children will approach historical information in many different ways.

This paper relates to the Technologies theme because content on the Web is integrally linked to technology issues - advances in information technology bring new structures and formats to the information presented. The analysis of how web-based content is presented to users also fits into the Organization of Information topic area.