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**Canadian Digital Information Strategy  
Comment Web Page**

**Joshua Chalifour**

**Comment:**

I do generally agree with the overall vision, scope, and challenges outlined in the strategy, as well as the objectives. However, I'd like to see more in-depth consideration given to the following:

- a) how we'll be sure that future generations are even going to comprehend digital technology, much less have the means to read what we store digitally (if we can't solve this in advance, everything else is practically useless).
- b) determining safeguards that our preservation techniques, information, and process are not abused.
- c) how the strategy can be used to improve the stature of IP issues and Canadian content/information issues in public discourse.

In terms of next steps, I wish the strategy was developed into a series of more pointed-working documents that address the three issues I pointed out above, in depth, as well as the other items in the strategy. I think there ought to be a plan to make each of the working documents very public, to push them as issues garnering political will.

In addition to answering your questions for comments above, since I've been reading the draft consultation version, I wanted to point out a few items that interested me. (Thank you for providing the document in a public forum, I really enjoyed thinking about the issues it raises.)

The strategy proposes strengthening content, ensuring its preservation, and maximizing its access and use. These are important for many reasons the report addresses regarding culture; the report also has some anchors in industry, stating that "nations that nurture their digital information assets and infrastructure will prosper."

In explaining why we need a strategy the report says "Digital content will be more and more in the form of conversations between people, using many different media types." This requires a more solid understanding of what constitutes conversation. The different media are one issue but within the use of those media the constructs of a conversation vary hugely. From blog posts to instant messages, even the selection of hyperlinks you choose to place in your web page.

The report offers a grid (p. 10) categorizing content by its source, motivation, audience, and characteristics. I believe there is a miscategorization here in that one source is the public domain and civil society whereas other sources are the business world or academic community. The report notes there may be some overlap but I think this categorization could be reconsidered and improved. The overlap seems too great to make the existing categories meaningful. In particular, I don't see why the

public domain is held separate from the rest, since it is not the same sort of a category at all. Every other category can include the public domain.

A key assumption in the proposed strategy is that "Information access and use supports Canada's societal goals-In society, equitable information access fosters equal opportunity for learning, creative and commercial enterprise." I think this is a wonderful base assumption, not simply for recognizing the need to have equitable access but also because I think it requires recognition of the integral role that this access plays for learning, creative, and commercial enterprise. And because information access leads to what enables people to access it-so if you read the report you'll see various (welcome) mentions of open standards and sources.

An outcome the strategy seeks is that Canada's information assets and knowledge are preserved in digital form. There is the point that we and future generations ought to have ongoing access to our digital knowledge and information assets, especially with regard to the intellectual, scientific, and creative accomplishments. I'm glad this point is in the forefront because it is a big problem.

Unfortunately, I feel that the strategy doesn't outline a sufficient method for ensuring the storage techniques to make this digital preservation clearly the right choice. Not that I'm saying it isn't, but we have many flaws to deal with in terms of digital preservation and I think those must be worked out much more completely. The plan does cover some ground in this regard. For example, in the objectives for ensuring preservation, it states "We are confronted with the need to choose what will be preserved and what will not." It calls for a reasoned framework to do so. The strategy notes that we're incapable (presently) of storing all the information we create. But haven't we always had this problem? We've never been able to store everything (digital or not) and what we do keep in museums and archives, is not necessarily placed there because of a reasoned framework. I'm not saying we shouldn't have such a framework however, but I'm questioning what it should be used to accomplish.

For all the digital information we create, how do we determine what will be significant to the future? Nobody's ever thought it was an important idea to record every phone conversation for eternity. However, now that we're looking at conversations in digital mediums, weblogs for example, and we feel like they've got to be preserved. Is the impetus for this the digital medium? I think the more difficult part of the preservation task is determining the "what" rather than the "how" and I suppose that's the purpose of the framework. Any framework though is going to be developed within our present context so I wonder how it will be able to account for the rapid changes that take place in digital mediums? When hyperlinks constitute conversations do they cease to be preservation worthy in the same way as day-to-day phone conversations? Interesting problem.

To continue on the "how" side of the digital preservation thread, the strategy addresses trusted digital networks (TDRs), which cover the "policy, process, standards, and technology framework for digital preservation." So TDRs address the "how" for making digital information accessible to future generations. I think two things are lacking here. One is the specifications for what constitutes a TDR but maybe that is better off in another document. The second is a thorough discussion of what we need to do to train future generations so that they're able to understand and access these TDRs. We cannot just assume that the work we put into creating them will easily carry on to the next generation. I would expect that a digital TDR is

a complex system, relying on current technologies that may be so obsolete that they're not even comprehensible to future generations. That's an ongoing concern that I've thought about in terms of mass replicability as a partial strategy for preservation .

Furthermore-the TDR idea, while not completely articulated yet (and as the strategy mentions, a proper TDR does not exist in Canada yet) does promote "...common attributes and open standards; provision of guidance and training; and development and sharing of open source tools." Great that it is being couched in open standards and open source!

One potential risk of TDRs is that they might conceivably be used as official checkplaces for "intellectual property" rights. I think this stands a great chance of being detrimental to the assumptions of the document for equitable access and the nurturing of digital assets. I may have a pessimistic view, but current IP trends, as controlled by short-term commercial enterprise, suggest that my pessimistic view for such a rights repository would be a likely consideration for misuse or abuse.

On developing an effective TDR, the strategy promotes the idea that "Effective R&D will enable the technical foresight and constant vigilance required to manage and preserve digital information" which is nice thinking but I still think this calls for a more deliberate outline. Switching gears, an idea the strategy introduces, which really fascinated me was "creating new competencies and positions such as 'digital curators' who would have stewardship responsibility for digital information." The strategy recommends raising "the profile of digital preservation needs and challenges within creator communities..." This is important because the changes digital media have provoked are barely audible in public discourse. As a whole, we should make these issues commonly understood by the greater population so that they can be acted on with political will. Information is within our environment and ought to be considered intimately.

Thanks for listening,

**-Joshua Chalifour**