# Going Down the Digital Highway

Margaret Conrad
President, Canadian Historical Association

## Introduction

The Internet and its related technologies offer both exciting opportunities and daunting challenges for voluntary organizations such as the Canadian Historical Association. While the digital revolution has not been as transformative as some of its early prophets predicted, it has changed the habits of most academic historians who order books online, communicate with colleagues primarily by e-mail, and increasingly expect to find journal articles in cyberspace. If Google and other Internet search engines have their way, we will soon have access to the libraries of the world at the click of a mouse. In such a communications climate, the CHA has the opportunity to make its intellectual resources, in particular its journal and booklets, more accessible by going online. The challenge is to do so without undermining the structures that help to sustain our operations which are always close to the bottom line.

Over the past two years the CHA has gone some distance down the digital road, a direction initially urged upon us by Del Muise, Associate Director of Carleton University's Centre for Public History. In response to Del's suggestion, CHA president Gerry Friesen asked the Council in the spring of 2004, to strike an Internet Communications Committee co-chaired by John Lutz and myself to explore the options available to the CHA in the area of Internet communication. The committee (which included Gabrielle Blais, Marielle Campeau, Geneviève Dumas, Don Fyson, David Moorman, Del Muise, and Frits Pannekoek) worked quickly to produce a series of recommendations that were adopted by the Council in the fall of 2004. The recommendations were based on the general principle that the CHA would better serve its membership and the public at large by making its publications available on the Internet. As a result, we embarked on three projects: the digitization of the CHA *Journal*, including back issues; the digitization of the 192 booklets in the general history and ethnic booklet series; and the redesign of the CHA website to make it more convivial and interactive. Gerry Friesen convinced the Department of Foreign Affairs to contribute $38,000 towards the costs of digitizing our booklets and *Journal*, while David Moorman put together a contingency fund ($53,819) that, *if necessary* (David was very careful to add that qualifier), could be drawn upon for Internet initiatives.

## The CHA Journal

Margaret Conrad chaired a sub-committee (Kerry Badgley, Dominique Marshall, Joan Sangster, Valerie Korinek, and Marielle Campeau) that oversaw the negotiation of a contract with Érudit, based at the Université de Montréal, to digitize the CHA *Journal*. Érudit expects to have the complete run of the CHA *Journal*, which was founded in 1922 under the title *Annual Reports*, available shortly. In 2003 the Council made the decision to publish a second yearly issue of the *Journal* so that we could remain eligible for SSHRC funding. The second issue, it was decided, would be published only in an electronic format, so beginning in 2007 we will post two issues a year of the CHA *Journal* online.

In bringing the CHA *Journal* into the digital age, we had several difficult decisions to make. First, we had to decide whether to opt for a not-for-profit electronic publisher or for a corporate entity such as Project Muse. If we had taken the latter route, the cost of accessing our articles would have blunted the promise of the Internet which has the potential to give scholars, teachers, students, and the general public throughout the world access to peer-review journal literature. Some scholars, most notably Roy Rosenzweig, Director of the Centre for History and New Media at George Mason University, see "open access" as an "unprecedented public good." (http://www.historians.org/Perpsectives/issues/2005/0504vic1.cfm). The CHA Council is in substantial agreement with this position, as is the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council which, in the fall of 2005, went on record as supporting the principle of open access, but without defining exactly what that would mean for publishers of academic journals.

After some deliberation, the CHA Council decided to adopt a two-year rolling wall, after which the *Journal* will be available to anyone with access to the Internet. By adopting open access after two years and being aggregated with other journals on the Érudit website, scholars who publish in the *Journal* will now gain a much broader national and international readership than was previously the case. Time will tell what impact this approach will have on our membership numbers.

Whether we decided to restrict access or not, we also had to consider whether to go with a Canadian or foreign publisher. As with so many areas of public policy, Québec has led the way in developing a Canadian alternative to the strictly corporate model. The Québec government in partnership with

the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and Université de Québec à Montréal have created Érudit, a not-for-profit organization charged with the responsibility for digitizing all of the academic journals published in Québec. Operating on the principles of open access, open formats, and open source software, Érudit currently hosts nearly 50 journals and offers ancillary services, including subscription management, archiving, searching capacity, and usage statistics. Érudit's processes are so well conceived and so impressively executed that they have been adopted in France and Belgium. If we can get our act together, this approach to research dissemination may eventually be adopted in other areas of Canada as well. The advantages of going with Érudit were obvious. The CHA benefits from the experience of the Érudit consortium and the trilingual interface (French, English, and Spanish) of the website, as well as its impressive reach. In 2004 the Érudit website averaged more than 150,000 visits a month, with 25% of the hits coming from France and 22% from the United States.

Copyright is another issue that needed to be addressed when it was decided to make the *Journal* available online. At the CHA we have only recently included a reference to electronic publishing in our contracts with authors and, for much of our history as an organization, copyright issues were, at best, vaguely defined. We have decided that instead of letting uncertainty impede our progress, we will adopt a range of policies that we hope will serve us well on the copyright front. The result was the development of our "due diligence" strategy, following advice from the Dissemination Committee of the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, which keeps a close eye on issues relating to copyright and fair use.

Before going online, the CHA sent a letter to each author or author's estate, when addresses could be found, announcing our intention to publish electronically. We have sent out

nearly 300 letters and received only positive responses. We also approached several authors whom we felt, because of their high public profile, might be opposed to having their articles accessible on the Internet, but no one asked that their work not be made available. We also published a notice in the CHA *Bulletin* indicating our intentions to go online. In addition, we will include a disclaimer on our website to the effect that all reasonable efforts have been made to contact authors who have published in the CHA *Journal* but, if anyone objects to having their article appear online, we will delete it. Such are the happy possibilities of Internet publishing.

The foregoing points to another problem for those planning to publish only on the Internet, as is the case with the second issue of the CHA *Journal*. "Digital-born" knowledge can be here today and gone tomorrow. In any decision to go digital, it is important to include a secure archiving policy. There is a movement afoot to encourage all Canadian universities to develop digital archival repositories for research that takes place within their confines, but it will be some time before this goal is fully accomplished. Fortunately for the CHA, Érudit has archival processes built into its services.

There is a strong possibility that, in the next round of SSHRC funding, there will be financial incentives to support electronic versions of academic journals. If we abandoned our print version, which we currently have no intention of doing, we would reap enormous savings in publications costs, but only because Érudit is heavily subsidized. In the long run we will almost certainly have to dig more deeply into our pockets to pay for producing our journals in electronic as well as print formats.

Skeptics may well conclude, with some regret, that academic knowledge will soon be disseminated only in digital formats. Even in the short run, our digital experience has encouraged

changes in the print version of the *Journal* and points to the end of journals as we know them. Instead of grouping our abstracts and contributor notes at the end of the journal as we once did, we are now obliged to attach them to each article. Most people access information by article, not by volume number, and they search more often by keyword than by journal title. In such a publishing environment, why bother with a volume number at all? Articles can be posted as they are peer-reviewed and revised without having to wait for other contributions to be added. Although this process would not preclude editorial boards from creating special journal issues, it may change the way that special issues are created. Other online sources on the topic can, for example, be linked and subsequent articles added as they appear. Even endnotes become a site for directly accessing other online resources. How - and even if - journals will survive the Internet embrace has yet to be determined, but the CHA is in the vanguard of a movement to bring some of the valued academic practices developed in the print era - peer-review and copy editing, for example - into the digital age.

**The CHA Booklets**
While we were sorting out these sticky issues, Gerry Friesen and I, working with Ian Wilson, Gabrielle Blais, Michael Eamon, and Jean-Stéphen Piché, concluded a Memorandum of Understanding with Library and Archives Canada in April 2005 that would create a partnership for digitizing and providing electronic access to the CHA's Historical Booklets and Canadian Ethnic Groups series. By this MOU, LAC has agreed to digitize and scan for optical character recognition the 192 CHA booklets in English and French, create a database for managing the digital texts, develop and host a Web-accessible version of them, and help us to promote the project. Although we cannot forecast the revenue effect of making the booklets freely available online, we see an ongoing demand for hard copy.

**The CHA Website**
On a third front, Don Fyson chaired a sub-committee (John Bonnett, Marg Conrad, Geneviève Dumas, John Lutz, Del Muise, and Brian Shipley) to oversee the revamping of the

CHA website. The website committee benefitted greatly from a report submitted by John Bonnett in August 2004, on behalf of the Canadian Committee on History and Computing, that outlined possible options for website development. Six companies responded to a request for letters of interest in the project and Leverus, a company based in Ottawa, was chosen to help the CHA to create a new online look. As part of this initiative, John Lutz worked with Leverus to develop a new logo for the CHA, which is now gracing our letterhead and new website, and will eventually be incorporated into the design of the CHA *Bulletin* and *Journal*. Our webmaster Brian Shipley played an important role in helping the committee move toward a more active website that includes, among other things, a members-only section, a calendar of events, and links to our new electronic publishing ventures.

**Conclusion**
We have sometimes had a bumpy ride on the digital highway, and the journey has created a lot of work for committee members and for Joanne Mineault and Marielle Campeau, who run our Ottawa office. Because of the experience with the Canadian History Portal, which proved too ambitious a project to sustain, the Internet Communications Committee was eager to build a strong base for our new online services. The CHA Council hopes that our Internet outreach will also support our other major initiative which is to attract more historians, and especially those in fields other than Canadian history, to the CHA. With more members we can better expand our programs and evolve into the kind of organization that our profession needs in the twenty-first century.