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# Crowdsourced Communications

My idea to help ensure that the public service will be ready to  
meet the needs of the future

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A problem that was expressed by many parliamentarians and civil servants who have run workshops at Concordia this past year – including Dr. Keith Archer and Senator James S. Cowan – was that the branches and officers of Parliament do a poor job communicating research findings and civic education material to the public. Branches of Parliament, such as the Senate, serve a key public function by doing in depth research on important policy matters in the form of Senate committee reports. However, Senator Cowan expressed concern in his workshop over the fact that the Senate has historically done very little to communicate the findings of landmark reports produced by Senators to Canadians who are not directly involved in politics or public policy.

The purpose of this report is to propose a contest series that will be led by Heritage Canada whose goal would be to help disseminate the research findings and civic education material of the branches and officers of Parliament to a wider audience. The contest would challenge Canadian post-secondary students to communicate key findings and useful information from reports and civic education material created by of the branches and officers of Parliament in innovative ways. Podcasts, video interviews, and infographics are just some of the ways that students could do so. The incentive for participation would be a cash prize to the winner (or group of winners) and public recognition for their success. Submissions would be judged according to their popularity among participants in an online poll and according to their creativity, sophistication, and epistemic accuracy in communicating the core message of the document in question.

Civic knowledge is positively and significantly associated with the future likelihood of voting and participation in other civic activities (Cohen & Chaffee 2013). This includes a range of knowledge including the more functional aspects of voting, such as information about voting

locations, as well as general knowledge, such as information about the processes and institutions of one's government. Digital media literacy is positively associated with online political engagement and exposure to a wider variety of political perspectives (Kahne et al. 2012). This is particularly compelling in the context of the proposed contest series as encouraging students to present information in a creative manner could also help them becoming more critical consumers of the information they encounter daily. These analytical skills could also help students tell the difference between real and fake news as the latter becomes more common in today's media ecology.

Specific sectors of the Canadian government have demonstrated a keen appreciation of the benefit of communicating research findings to the wider public in an easily accessible format – a process frequently referred to as “knowledge translation” in government documents. According to a recent evaluation of the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR)'s *Knowledge Translation Funding Program*, CIHR-funded knowledge translation projects “performed well against CIHR’s existing measures of success” and contributed to fulfillment of the organization’s mandate (Canada 2013). These encouraging results suggest that the proposed contest series would be an effective way to contribute to the overarching goals of the government organizations whose reports would be the focus of a given contest.

Each year, Heritage Canada would be provided with enough money to run four of these contests. When determining which government report or program should become the focus of the contest, the contest committee will need to consider the following factors. They will consider whether there is an important political event, such as an election or referendum, approaching in near future. In this case, the committee might choose to highlight a report which explains why the election or referendum was called and provides them with the information they would need

to make an informed choice during said event. The contest committee might also consider whether a specific social or political issue has been making national headlines as of late. For example, a recent Abacus report found that a majority of post-secondary students are worried about where they will be able to save up enough money to buy a home soon after graduation (Coletto 2016). The B.C. government's decision to implement a 15% tax on foreign home owners in August 2016 could have served as an exemplary impetus for the contest committee to select a report by the Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation to be the focus of a contest. Lastly, branches and officers of Parliament would be allowed to recommend a maximum of one report or program per year for the contest committee's consideration. This would allow those with intimate knowledge of a branch or officer's inner workings to seek out additional attention for exceptional reports or programs while avoiding the problem of overwhelming the contest committee with submissions.

The first-stage evaluation will judge submissions according to their creativity, sophistication, and epistemic accuracy in communicating the core message of the document in question. Alzahrani et al. note that these are all critical components in the effective and trustworthy dissemination of the core message of a government report or program (2017). Each of the three components would make up 25% of the final grade used to evaluate contest submissions. The final 25% would be scored according to the submission's popular appeal during the second-stage evaluation – a process which will be discussed later in this section. The creativity competent would evaluate the narrative that contestants created to tell the story of the report or program's core message. The sophistication component would evaluate the technical skills demonstrated by the contestant in the creation of their communications product. The

epistemic accuracy component would evaluate whether the communications product misrepresented or oversimplified any of the ideas in the report or program.

Contestants will submit their communications products privately to the contest committee. After the contest committee completes their first-stage evaluation, the twenty submissions with the highest scores will then be uploaded to the Heritage Canada website. This gatekeeping component is added to the contest to ensure that communications products are indeed epistemically accurate, thus avoiding the government-sanctioned promotion of low-quality communications products riddled with misinformation. This gatekeeping component would allow the government to weed out any controversial submissions. By providing a curated list of options to vote for, the government also avoids a scenario where users rally around a contextually inappropriate option for nefarious reasons.

After the top submissions are uploaded to the Heritage Canada website, the wider public will be allowed to vote on and share their favorite submission. Scores for the final 25% of the grade will accordingly reflect submissions' relative popularity. The submission with the highest number of votes would receive full marks in this grading category (25 marks on 25) while each of the remaining submissions will receive a mark which reflects the proportional difference between the number of votes they respectively received relative to the submission with the highest number of votes. The contestants who proceed to the next round will be prompted to promote their submissions widely on social media. Incorporating a popularity component into the evaluation is important as it incentivizes contestants to actively promote their submission to their social network. Seeing as their submissions contain important information about a report or program that the government believes deserves greater attention, the act of sharing helps the government achieve that end. Another key benefit of the voting process is that it represents an

opportunity to get individuals to subscribe to either Heritage Canada's newsletter or the newsletter of the branches or officer of Parliament which wrote the study upon which the communications product was based. This can be done by prompting users to subscribe to the newsletter upon submitting their vote.

Young Canadians are not as politically apathetic as many people make them out to be. Many are interested in politics and want to contribute to democratic governance. On the other side of the equation, government agencies, parliamentarians, and civil servants are not as out of touch with today's youth as many people make them out to be. The contest proposed in this paper is a way for young Canadians and government agencies to work together towards the attainment of their respective goals. Future generations should try to find a way to contribute to democratic governance in their own creative way. Young Canadians should not feel discouraged if they find that none of the traditional avenues for civic engagement – such as volunteering for a political party or a local community group – appeal to them. Instead, they should try and find ways to match their own interests and talents with a specific need that the government has. Making a unique contribution to society by adding your own verse to the public discourse is an act which cuts to the core of democratic participation. If the contest proposed in this essay and other programs in its spirit are implemented, the government would be compelling young Canadians to contribute to democratic governance in a much more personal way. Given the collective nature of democracy, this is something that all Canadians would benefit from.

## References

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