

EVALUATING THE WEB PRESENCE OF VOLUNTARY SECTOR ORGANIZATIONS: AN ASSESSMENT OF CANADIAN WEB SITES

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, considerable attention in Canada has been focused on strengthening relationships between the voluntary sector, government and industry. Information technology is an important tool for the sector, but systems are often difficult and costly to purchase and maintain—particularly for small- and medium- sized groups. Unlike e-business and the private sector, little attention has been paid to how the Internet can be used in the voluntary sector. This article addresses three specific research questions: 1) How are national Canadian voluntary sector organizations using Web sites? 2) How well-designed are these Web sites in terms of usability and aesthetics and 3) How can Canadian voluntary organizations improve their Web sites to meet organizational objectives?

Some 184 English language, national Canadian voluntary organizations' Web sites were rated, using a standardized tool to assess organizational objectives and to evaluate functionality, navigation and aesthetics. These sites currently offer limited functionality, and many are not well-designed. The article draws lessons from information technology theory and practice to demonstrate how the functionality and design of voluntary sector Web sites (in Canada and elsewhere) can be improved, to better support organizational objectives and to reduce the "digital divide" between the profit and nonprofit sectors.

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The precise definitions of the “nonprofit sector,” the “voluntary sector” or the “third sector” have been the subject of extensive debate in the literature. These terms are often used interchangeably, despite the fact that each term has a precise meaning. The nonprofit sector is large and diverse, encompassing nonprofit institutions, such as hospitals and schools; professional associations; and a host of community and public interest organizations. Febbraro, Hall and Pargmegiani (1999) suggest that the voluntary sector is most appropriately defined as including both nonprofit and voluntary organizations. They identify five key defining characteristics of nonprofit/voluntary organizations as follows: (1) organized, (2) private, (3) self-governing, (4) voluntary and (5) not involved with distributing profits.

This article focuses on selected, national, voluntary organizations in Canada. Professional associations, while a significant part of the sector, are excluded. In recent years, awareness of the importance of the voluntary sector to the Canadian economy and society has increased. It has been estimated that 12% of the country’s GDP passes through its estimated 200,000 nonprofit organizations (Stewart, 1996), accounting for around 5% of the national labour force.

Moreover, the sector is growing quickly. In addition to paid labour, the sector depends on a vast army of volunteers, whose donated time is estimated at one billion hours of labour—the equivalent of half a million full-time jobs (Duchesne 1989). However, a variety of changes, including government downsizing, have simultaneously increased the demands on the sector and reduced traditional sources of revenue.

Adoption of information technology (IT) has the potential to improve productivity and service provision in the voluntary sector. Although considerable attention has focused on the emergence of “e-business” and the use of the Internet in the private sector, less attention has been paid to how the Internet is and can be used by the voluntary sector.

It has been suggested that rapid technological change is exacerbating the pressures faced by nonprofit organizations (VSI 2002). While creating new opportunities, technology also presents an enormous risk, because of the costs to develop and maintain IT systems. The “digital divide” implies more than just access to technology; it also involves the skills, knowledge, control and resources needed to use it effectively (Burt and Taylor 2000; Clement and Shade 2000). The specter of a growing “digital divide” has been identified as a critical issue in the sector in at least three ways:

- 1) From the perspective of information communities served—the information technology “haves” and “have nots” (Servon and Nelson 2000),
- 2) The growing gap within the sector, particularly between large and small organizations (VSI 2002), and
- 3) The difference between the nonprofit sector and for-profit firms, most pronounced in countries such as the United States where for-profit and

nonprofit organizations “compete” in human services and health care markets (Salamon 2002).

In Canada, where education, healthcare and a substantial proportion of social services are provided by public institutions, this last form of “competition” is perhaps less acute than it is in the US. Nevertheless, competition between the nonprofit and private sectors is evident, for example social marketing programs pit community organizations against private sector companies on issues such as health promotion, injury prevention or the environment (Andreasen 1995).

In the past, considerable attention has focused on access to the “public sphere” and access to the mass media by nonprofit organizations (Curran 1991; Phelan 1991). More recently, attention has shifted to how nonprofit organizations participate in the digital age. Some suggest that the Internet provides opportunities for a wider range of players, large and small, to participate in the public sphere, creating a new form of “tele-democracy” or “digital democracy” (Servon and Nelson 2000). Others suggest that “the only question is how fast and extensively large corporations will move in reconsolidating their predominance and control” of both the technology and content (Lorimer and Gasher 2000). Regardless of the assumptions about the value or importance of information technology to voluntary organizations, understanding how voluntary organizations use IT and how well they use it is an important contribution to these discussions.

The Canadian voluntary sector is considered to be “one of the most connected in the world” (Pargmegiani and Sachdeva 2000), yet there is very little current academic research that explores how Canadian voluntary sector organizations are actually making use of such Internet connectivity. One survey indicated that 66% of Canadian charitable organizations believe that “the Internet is changing the way voluntary organizations are operating” (EKOS Research Associates 2001). It is generally accepted that access to information technologies and the Internet will be of benefit to organizations in the voluntary sector (Burt and Taylor 2000; Eisner et al. 2001; National Council of Nonprofit Associations 1997; Park 2001). It is also evident, however, that nonprofit organizations have yet to fully realize the benefits of adopting Internet and other information technologies (EKOS Research Associates 2001; Independent Sector 2001).

This article investigates the Web presence of voluntary sector organizations in Canada. It addresses three specific research questions: 1) How do Canadian voluntary sector organizations use Web sites? What functions are supported? What services are offered? 2) How well-designed are the Web sites of Canadian voluntary organizations in terms of usability and aesthetics? and 3) How can Canadian voluntary sector organizations improve their Web sites to meet their organizational objectives?

LITERATURE REVIEW

To date, most of the research seeking to understand how the voluntary sector uses information technology has been done by surveying organizations. Such surveys offer very basic findings and provide limited insights beyond the adoption rates of specific information technologies. For example, a survey conducted for *Independent Sector* and IT-provider Cisco Systems by Princeton Survey Research Associates (2001) studied 200 executives in “human service” organizations and reported that 49% of those surveyed had Web sites and 52% had an office network. Saxton and Game (2001) reported findings from a survey of 75 organizations in the UK, and EKOS Research surveyed 917 organizations in Canada. As is common in these studies, the EKOS study offered aggregate-level data only, and it did not assess how individual organizations are using their Web sites. The initial data showed that many Canadian voluntary sector organizations are creating and using Web sites. As might be expected, the EKOS data showed that Web presence is related to organizational revenue: 60% of organizations with annual revenues in excess of \$500,000 currently have Web sites compared to only 24% of those with revenues less than \$100,000 (EKOS Research Associates 2001).

Although nonprofit organizations’ corporate objectives differ fundamentally from those of for-profit organizations, the basic organizational processes and functions of both organization types do not. As Drucker (1990) states, “the source of its money is probably the greatest single difference between the nonprofit sector and business and government” (p. 56). In contrast to the for-profit sector, nonprofits may provide excellent services that are in high demand but that do not generate sufficient revenue to survive. This is because many voluntary organizations provide services to one set of “clients” (recipients of their services), while generating revenue from another (for example, government or donors).

A considerable amount of research examined the ways in which corporate concepts, such as marketing, apply in the context of nonprofit organizations (Kotler and Zaltman 1971; Lefebvre and Flora 1988; Lovelock and Weinberg 1989). In addition, many studies have explored definitions of “excellence” or “performance” of voluntary organizations and their link to organizational strategies, processes and practices including leadership, marketing, resource development and the like (Beilefield 1994; Croker 2001; Padanyi and Gainer 2001).

In the information technology field, considerable research has examined the role of technology generally and Web sites in particular to support corporate objectives (e.g., Kelsey 2002). Several studies of “e-business,” for example, have attempted to develop frameworks for understanding the ways in which technology supports corporate value chains and the ways in which the Internet has changed the face of competition. In a

recent article, Porter (2001) examined applications of the Internet in the corporate value chain, and analogous opportunities can be identified for nonprofit organizations. The application of Porter's competitive strategy model has been shown to be valuable for nonprofit strategy development and implementation (Lindenberg 2001). Typically, for example, nonprofits have a range of activities associated with inbound logistics—acquiring materials and information on how to develop “products” and “services.” Most are essentially service providers; the services they develop and distribute may include information provision, mobilization, behavior change, advocacy, direct services and the like. Nonprofits must deliver these services to “clients,” even though the recipients of these services are often not those who pay for the services rendered.

Just as “social marketing” has been explored as a means by which nonprofit organizations may obtain their objectives, “persuasive technologies” have been explored in the context of their effectiveness in promoting change (Fogg 1999). For example, King and Tester (1999) assess trends and examples of the use of persuasive technologies in health, safety and environment applications. Their findings emphasize ways in which these technologies may achieve their ends: simulated experiences, surveillance, “environments of discovery,” virtual groups of communities and personalization. Berdichevsky and Neunschwander (1999) emphasize the growing importance of considering ethical issues in nonprofits and, in particular, the importance of privacy, disclosure, accuracy and “the golden rule.” Similarly, a study of mental health information on the Internet (Schwartz and Christakis 2001) outlined a number of guiding principles to protect and promote the interests of those seeking information on the Internet, thus reinforcing the importance of attention to privacy, disclosure, cultural appropriateness and accessibility.

Increasingly, attention has been focused on exploring how Web site effectiveness, notably functionality and design, can be evaluated (Madsen 1999; Nielsen and Tahir 2001; Ceaparu and Shneiderman 2002). In addition to developing and applying standards for navigation, attention has focused on the aesthetic aspects of design and some have noted the ongoing debate between informational and experiential approaches to interface design (Seo 2002). A number of assessment methods to evaluate Web site quality and effectiveness have been developed (see Barnes and Vidgen 2000; Katerattanakul and Siau 1999; Schubert and Dettling 2002; Zhang and von Dran 2001) and applied in the corporate context. Much work has also been done to assess the accessibility of Websites for a wide variety of users (See the Universal Usability in Practice project, at <http://www.otal.umd.edu/uupractice/index.html> and the Universal Usability Guide at <http://www.universalusability.org>). Some research addresses the specific usability issues faced by people with disabilities (see Hung 2001 for a review of issues for people with visual disabilities; and Deng 2001 for a discussion of issues related to mobility impairment).

Voluntary organizations were among the early adopters of electronic communications networks to support their efforts, and the role of the Internet has been well understood as an important means of grass roots organizing and as an advocacy tool (for example, Naughton 2001). More recently, studies have also been undertaken to identify the specific application of information technology in the nonprofit sector, for example, in improving management control and accountability (Nitterhouse 1999; Prives 2000); supporting volunteers (Mcduff et al. 2001); promoting “e-advocacy” (Krehely and Montilla 2001); improving organizational effectiveness (Pollak and Lampkin 2001) and enhancing service provision (Creaturo 2001). In addition, private sector consultants offer advice on a wide range of applications from grant management to “e-fundraising.” However, the work on information technology is still in its infancy, and much of it is descriptive. With the exception of some work on government Web sites (e.g., Gant and Gant 2002), there has been scant attention paid to systematic analysis of Web sites developed for and used by non-business organizations.

As the review of the literature shows, theoretical frameworks and approaches used in the private sector (e.g., strategy, organizational theory, leadership, marketing, financial analysis and reporting) have been adapted to the nonprofit sector. Information technology has the potential to further organizational objectives in the nonprofit sector, just as it has in the for-profit sector. Yet, relatively little has been written on the strategic application of information technology in general or on the use of Websites in particular. By integrating theory on IT strategy and Website design with data on current voluntary sector practices, this article suggests ways in which voluntary sector organizations (in Canada and beyond) can make better use of Internet technologies to achieve their objectives.

METHODOLOGY

Data were collected from 184 English-language, Canadian voluntary-sector Web sites, drawn from a list on the Canadian Centre for Philanthropy Web site available at <http://www.ccp.ca/information/links.html>. (See *Appendix A* for a complete list of Web sites included in this study.) Web sites for this study were selected from Canada-wide organizations rather than from local organizations. Where there were several affiliates of the same organization (for example, provincial or local chapters), only the national Web site was used.

As Table 1 illustrates, the organizations included in this study represent voluntary organizations from a variety of sectors. Health-related Web sites accounted for more than one-fifth of those considered (21%), followed by environmental Web sites (13%). To a certain extent these categorizations are subjective, and many organizations could be placed in more than one category. For example, Project Ploughshares is a faith-based organization, but its principal objective is to promote peace. The Council of Canadians has some

TABLE 1: DESCRIPTION OF SAMPLE BY TYPE OF ORGANIZATION (DEFINED BY SECTOR)

Sector	# of Organizations	% of Organizations
Arts	11	6.0%
Development	9	4.9%
Education	8	4.3%
Environment	24	13.0%
Equality Seeking/Human Rights	5	2.7%
Faith	7	3.8%
Health	39	21.2
Justice	3	1.6%
Other	10	5.4%
Peace	2	1.1%
Philanthropy	12	6.5%
Political	13	7.1%
Research	4	2.2%
Social Services and Support	17	9.2%
Youth Services and Support	12	6.5%
TOTAL	184	100%

initiatives, which might be considered health- or environment-related (for example, regarding bovine growth hormones); however, it was founded with the expressly political objective of opposition to free trade.

The researchers attempted to categorize according to the principal sector rather than according to an organization's function. Although most voluntary organizations have some political aims and advocacy functions, "political" groups pursue explicitly political objectives or represent the interests of a particular interest group. Equality-seeking/human rights groups also have political aims, but they are generally regarded as advocating on behalf of populations facing forms of discrimination prohibited under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms or Human Rights Code or in accordance with international standards for human rights and humanitarian law.

The authors modified an assessment tool from Grant and Prescod (2001) for examining voluntary sector Web sites. A team of student research assistants visited each of the Web sites within a two-week period. Data were collected using an objective measurement tool, components of which are described in each section below. For example, in assessing features available on the site, a series of very specific questions—each with a "yes" or "no" answer was investigated.

The research team collected data by directly examining Web sites; data were not collected about Web sites by surveying organizations. This is an important distinction, because data gathered from individual organizations are

less likely to be consistent than data collected by a small number of researchers using an objective set of guidelines. At the same time, research that would include interviews with organizations would enrich the study.

RESULTS

Question One: How are Canadian voluntary sector organizations using Web sites? What functions are supported? What services are offered? Are Canadian voluntary sector organizations establishing and using Web sites? After a review of the literature on “e-business” (Grant and Prescod 2001; Porter 2001), supplemented by the literature on nonprofit and voluntary sector organizations (VSI 2001; Burt and Taylor 2001; Kerr 2002), this study identified the following eight different activities and services that can be delivered to Web site users by voluntary organizations:

- 1) provision of information,
- 2) organizational promotion,
- 3) fundraising,
- 4) advocacy support,
- 5) member support,
- 6) media support,
- 7) community development and
- 8) volunteer recruitment

This study did not address other aspects of the supply chain, such as links to suppliers or the use of intranets.

The initial results show that only information provision and organizational promotion are widely available, both offered by more than 80% of the sites. In contrast, fewer than 3% of sites offer full support for advocacy (e.g., online petitions or direct email links to politicians). Approximately 35% of sites offer some support for online fundraising (e.g., information to facilitate donations or acceptance of online donations).

A summary of findings is presented in Table 2. Note that these results were obtained by simple observation of features on the site, which were either present or absent at the time of data collection.

Provision of Information Content: Most of the Web sites' principal functions were related to information for various publics—potential clients, potential donors and the media, among others. Sites included the following: general content about the organization (89%), links to other organizations (72%), links to government sources (50%), “promotional” material intended to persuade (82%) and media support (49%). Almost half provided copies of press releases and media briefs.

TABLE 2: SUMMARY OF FEATURES PRESENT IN SAMPLED WEB SITES

Web Site Feature	# of Organizations	% of Organizations
Basic Information Provision		
General background on organization (e.g., information for media)	164	89%
Information for partners	158	86%
Information regarding services	161	88%
Promotional Activities		
Promotional elements designed to specifically promote the organization and its objectives	151	82%
Fundraising		
Downloadable forms	60	33%
Online donations	66	36%
Online payment (either direct or through a third party)	49	27%
Advocacy Support		
Lists of politicians	6	3%
Information regarding advocacy issues	68	37%
Sample letters	11	6%
Allows online email to politicians	5	3%
Online petitions	4	2%
Member/User Support		
Online support	64	35%
Feedback forms	17	9%
Links to government sources	91	50%
Links to other organizations	132	72%
Media Support		
Online press releases	90	49%
Briefing materials	77	42%
Volunteer Recruitment		
Volunteer recruitment activity within the last week	2	1%
Volunteer recruitment activity within the last month	2	1%
More than one month since last volunteer recruitment activity	32	17%
Currency of Site		
Evidence of updating within last 24 hours	12	7%
Evidence of updating within last 3 days	21	11%

The content of the sites was rated on a five-point scale. No information was obtained regarding the role of the Web site in an organization's overall communication strategy or the level of usage or impact of the Web sites on an organization's target audiences. About half the sites were judged "good" or "excellent" in terms of the quality of information, range of information and effective communication of a message (see Table 6 for more detail). Half the sites were considered to be "just brochureware," meaning they were essentially electronic distribution mechanisms for print materials. This, of course, is a significant benefit for organizations, allowing them to communicate with potential supporters at a fraction of the costs of advertising, direct mail or telemarketing.

Online Support for Fundraising: When assessing the extent to which Canadian voluntary sector Web sites are able to offer support for fundraising, three features were considered: 1) Does the site provide downloadable forms for making donations? 2) Can people signal an intention to donate online? and 3) Can payment be made online, either directly or through a third party? The analysis shows that almost half of the sites (47%) offered no online support for fundraising, 25% of sites made one fundraising activity available, 16% had two activities enabled, while only 13% supported all three fundraising activities. (See Table 3.)

Table 4 below lists the 24 organizations that currently provide support for all three fundraising activities. Currently, it does not appear that any specific type of voluntary organization is particularly good at online fundraising. Instead, it seems that organizations across the voluntary spectrum are only now starting to experiment with support for online fundraising.

Support for Advocacy Activities: Canadian charitable organizations are restricted in the amount of political lobbying they may undertake (no more than 10% of resources may be spent on this activity). Nevertheless, some advocacy is a core function of many voluntary groups. Five different types of advocacy activities present on the Web sites were assessed:

- 1) Provision of a list of politicians (site visitors could find out how to voice their concerns to elected officials),
- 2) Information regarding advocacy issues,
- 3) Sample letters,
- 4) Direct email links to politicians and
- 5) Online petitions.

As Table 5 illustrates, 62% of sites surveyed had no facilities to provide advocacy support. Given that many of the organizations have some advocacy component to their mission, it appears that most have not yet figured out how to use the Web to support advocacy.

TABLE 3: FUNDRAISING ACTIVITIES

# Fundraising Activities	# Organizations	% Organizations
0	86	47%
1	45	24%
2	29	16%
3	24	13%

TABLE 4: ORGANIZATIONS OFFERING THREE, ONLINE FUNDRAISING ACTIVITIES

Organization Name	Category
AIDS Committee of Toronto	health
Amnesty International Canada	equality seeking/human rights
Association of Fundraising Professionals	other: fundraising
Asthma Society of Canada	health
Canada Family Action Coalition	political
Canada World Youth / Jeunesse Canada Monde	youth services and support
Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society	environment
Canadian Red Cross	health
Canadian Special Olympics	other: sports
Canadian Women's Foundation	philanthropy
CARE Canada	development
Center For Social Justice	equality seeking/human rights
Children's Aid Foundation	philanthropy
Children's Wish Foundation of Canada	philanthropy
Christian Blind Mission International Canada	health
Christian Children Fund of Canada	youth services and support
Council For Canadian Unity	political
Council of Canadians	political
David Suzuki Foundation	environment
Federation of Ontario Naturalists	environment
Project Ploughshares	peace
Prostate Cancer Research Foundation of Canada	health
UNICEF Canada	youth services and support
World Federation of Hemophilia	health

TABLE 5: ADVOCACY FEATURES

# Advocacy Features	# Organizations	% Organizations
0	115	62%
1	55	30%
2	7	4%
3	3	2%
4	4	2%
5	0	0%

Question Two: How well designed are the Web sites of Canadian voluntary organizations in terms of usability and aesthetics? Assessments were made on various aspects of the Web sites, including overall attractiveness, effectiveness in communicating the site's "message," as well as the quality and range of the information. In general, the Web sites were found to be competently developed and maintained—that is, obvious mistakes or broken links were reported in only a small percentage of cases. Even though overall site attractiveness is a subjective factor, and aesthetic assessments depend on a wide range of cultural, demographic and individual characteristics, the aesthetic experience is an important factor in attracting and retaining users. As such, specific aspects of design were identified and assessed.

The following factors were considered in assessing overall site attractiveness: 1) Layout of the site (e.g., sites with multiple frames that required scrolling in small portions of the screen were rated lower than those with simple, clean designs that avoided a cluttered appearance), 2) Choice of colors (with a specific focus on readability, e.g., sites with links that were hard to read were rated as less attractive than those with high-contrast colors) and 3) Usage of design features (e.g., sites with flashing and/or scrolling text were generally considered less attractive than those without these elements. Highly rated sites used new design tools like Flash to create animation, rather than relying on basic HTML commands).

When assessing effectiveness in communicating the "message," the assessors were asked whether they could determine the organization's purpose or objectives from the Web site. An excellent site would offer detailed information either on the front page of the site or in a link clearly identified on the front page. Poor sites were ones where even after searching the site, it was still not possible to clearly determine the purpose of the organization.

Quality and range of information were closely related. They were assessed in terms of the level of detail and timeliness of the information provided (e.g., a site promoting events within the next three months would be rated as having good or excellent quality of information, whereas one promoting events that had happened months or years ago would receive a poor or very poor rating), and in terms of the scope of information provided (e.g., Does the site explain what the organization does? Does it list officers of the organization?

Does it provide contact details? Does it offer examples of what money is used for, if the organization is a fundraising one? Does it explain how to join the organization? Does it list events the organization is planning? Does it provide information for volunteers? Does it provide press releases and information on media coverage of the organization?). Given the different objectives of the various sites assessed, no specific formula was used to calculate quality and range of information ratings. For a site to be rated as excellent in terms of quality of information however, all information on the site had to be judged to be very detailed and current. In contrast, a very poor site had limited information that was very much out of date.

On these factors, the majority of Web sites were rated as “good” or “excellent,” as shown in Table 6. Slightly more than half of the sites were rated as “good” (36%) or “excellent” (19%) in terms of overall site attractiveness.

Further assessments were made of a variety of Web site usability features including ease of use, navigation and layout. Layout was assessed by page appearance (e.g., a page in which scrolling was required either to see the edge of a graphic or to read a column of text exhibited poor layout) and positioning of information (pages in which graphics overlapped text or pages with important information at the bottom of a long list demonstrated poor layout).

As noted below, options for personalization were found very infrequently. Examples of personalization options included the ability to send a choice of greeting cards from a site, or to create a personal information profile. Personalization options were rated as “good” or “excellent” depending on the ease of use of the features.

The clear navigation feature was assessed in terms of the ease of determining where the site visitor was in the site. “Excellent” and “good” sites included site maps, persistent navigation bars (e.g., list of links that was always in the same place on the page, usually at the top, bottom, or on the left-hand side), and distinct colors to distinguish a list of links from links that had been visited. Excellent sites also used roll-over navigation options, where moving the mouse over a link would provide additional information about where the link would lead the user. Sites that actively engaged the visitor included features like discussion areas or live chats, animated demonstrations or site tours, and quizzes.

Speed of site loading is dependent on a number of factors. Assessors were asked to rate loading speed in relative terms—that is, in relation to their general experiences on the Web. For example, how did the loading speed of a particular site compare to that of others? Click-throughs to other Web sites were easily identified, and they were assessed according to the variety and quantity of links. Site-searching capability was also easily identified, with most sites either providing excellent search facilities or none at all. Search features of sites with intermediate ratings were hard to find, didn't work at all, or provided ambiguous results.

TABLE 6: OVERALL ASSESSMENT OF WEB SITE DESIGN

Criterion	Very Poor	Poor	Adequate	Good	Excellent
Overall Site Attractiveness	2%	14%	30%	36%	19%
Effectiveness in Communicating "message"	3%	17%	26%	35%	19%
Quality of Information	4%	10%	32%	36%	19%
Range of Information	5%	14%	27%	34%	20%

TABLE 7: DESIGN FEATURES

Feature	Very Poor or NA	Poor	Adequate	Good	Excellent
Home Page layout	4%	14%	30%	31%	20%
Personalization	85%	7%	4%	2%	2%
Clear navigation at all times	11%	13%	16%	33%	27%
Active engagement of visitor (click-on participation features)	44%	11%	18%	21%	6%
Speed of load	3%	7%	12%	34%	45%
Click throughs to other relevant Web sites (Links)	32%	6%	14%	28%	21%
Site search capability (visible, functional)	60%	4%	3%	8%	25%

Table 7 shows that in terms of overall layout, ease of use, speed of load and limited number of click-throughs, more than half of the websites were rated as "good" or "excellent." However, a smaller percentage of the sites were considered to provide "good" (8%) or "excellent" (25%) search capabilities, and very few offered "good" or "excellent" personalization (4%).

Overall Quality of Design: The design features of each site were identified, using a checklist of nine 'good' design features, and nine 'bad' design features adapted from Grant and Prescod (2001). As shown in Table 8, good design included clear use of color, careful use of scrolling, and provision of different ways to get straight to where the user wants to go on the site. Bad design features, as shown in Table 9, included poor use of graphics, missing and broken links, and the need for multiple clicks to move up or down within the site. Design features were recorded as being present or absent.

A "design score" was calculated to determine the overall design quality of each site. Poor design features were given a negative weighting. Thus a site's design score could range from 9 (all good design features present, no poor design features) to -9 (only poor design features present). The average design score was

TABLE 8: GOOD DESIGN FEATURES

Good Design Features	% of Organizations
Clear use of color and background	79%
Good signposts at all times	70%
Different ways to get straight to where you want to go	51%
Careful use of scrolling (limited, put important information at top, especially links)	54%
Site tour/demo available and useful	20%
Chance to preview content without registration/membership	98%
Bypass graphic downloads to get to needed functions	17%
Site Map	30%
Opportunity for Customers/Users to give feedback	70%

TABLE 9: BAD DESIGN FEATURES

Bad Design Web Site Feature	% of Organizations
Need an ID/Registration before any area of the site can be viewed	1%
Multiple clicks up/down to get somewhere (i.e., more than 2 clicks, no "jump" navigation)	28%
Inability to know where you are in the site layout	32%
Dead ends, after several clicks with no new content (perhaps under construction or no real info)	12%
Missing links messages	4%
Inappropriate "Mystery Meat" Links (user has to guess where the click-throughs are and for what)	8%
Poor use of graphic intensive techniques (long load, no bypass, not useful)	21%
Obvious Carelessness (e.g., spelling/proofing errors)	5%
Site is just "brochureware" (i.e., information only, no additional functionality)	52%

3.3, typically representing a site that had about 5 good design features and 2 poor ones. The 24 sites that had a design score of 7 or higher are listed in Table 10.

TABLE 10: THE TOP-24, WELL-DESIGNED SITES

Organization Name	Design score	Good design	Bad design
National Ballet School	9	9	0
Canadian Women's Health Network	9	9	0
National Ballet of Canada	8	8	0
Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada	8	8	0
IOF Foresters	8	8	0
Canadian Society of Association Executives	8	8	0
Children's Aid Foundation	8	8	0
Amnesty International Canada	7	7	0
Canadian Race Relations Foundation	7	7	0
MADD Canada	7	7	0
Careers the Next Generation	7	7	0
Canadian Nature Federation	7	7	0
Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society	7	7	0
Nature Conservancy of Canada	7	7	0
Osteoporosis Society of Canada	7	7	0
Max Bell Foundation	7	7	0
CARE Canada	7	7	0
Community Foundation of Canada	7	7	0
Historica Foundation of Canada	7	8	1
Alzheimer Society of Canada	7	8	1
J.W. McConnell Family Foundation	7	8	1
Ketchum Canada Inc.	7	8	1
John P. Robarts Research Institute	7	8	1
CUSO	7	8	1

Question Three: How can Canadian voluntary sector organizations improve their Web sites to meet organizational effectiveness? This study shows that about half of the Web sites studied in the Canadian voluntary sector organizations are well-designed in terms of functionality, usability and

aesthetics. However, most sites do not provide those advanced features to engage users that are considered key to “persuasive” technologies.

Research by Zhang and von Dran (2001) applies a model of customer expectations developed by a Japanese consultant (Kano et al. 1984) to show that over time, features that were once considered novelties on Web sites (e.g., sophisticated navigation tools, interactive features) become demanded and expected as basic features. This suggests that nonprofits need to be more attentive to design issues.

Voluntary sector organizations understand that it is important to engage their potential Web audiences, but the features that are currently the most widely available on Canadian voluntary organization sites (i.e., information provision and organizational promotion) are not ones offering much ongoing audience engagement. It is essential to provide features that go beyond the target audience's basic expectations; yet voluntary sector Web sites are not generally doing this. Zhang and von Dran's (2001) research also notes that expectations for site features vary depending upon the purpose of the site. Their findings can be applied to voluntary sector Web sites to determine what features will be most likely to engage their audiences. Voluntary sector organizations can improve their Web presence, by combining a clear understanding of their organizational objectives and functions with sound Web site design principles.

Probably the most striking finding of the study relates to building relationships with users and developing online communication sites. The majority of voluntary Web sites provide opportunities for visitors to ask questions or provide feedback. Most organizations take far too long to respond. Specifically, all sites were sent feedback by the researchers. More than 50% of organizations took longer than five days to respond to email enquiries. While it is possible that organizations might respond most quickly to messages regarding fund raising and donations, this was not specifically investigated.

Nevertheless, regardless of message content, fast response times are key to building positive relationships with members of the sites' user communities. Someone who sends a general enquiry message might not become a donor or become involved in the organization at all if there is a long response time. It was also found that more than 40% of sites do not actively engage the user, and less than half allow for any sort of personalization by the user. Fewer than 10% of the sites provide customized feedback forms, but 70% do provide the opportunity to contact the organization via email to provide feedback (see Table 11).

DISCUSSION

This article examines how Canadian voluntary sector organizations are using their Web sites. Drawing on information technology theory and practice, it outlines a number of recommendations to help voluntary sector organizations improve their Web sites, so that they can better support their organizational

TABLE 11: RESPONSE TIME

Response time to email message	% of Organizations
Within 4 hours	17%
Within 12 hours	14%
Within 24 hours	10%
Within 3 days	9%
More than 5 days	46%
Email not working/no address	5%

objectives within the context of an information technology strategy. Like for-profit organizations, voluntary organizations should perform the following:

- Assess the ways in which IT can support processes across the value chain cost-effectively.
- Assess the specific ways in which an Internet/Web strategy should support organizational processes and consider a full range of functions (for example in fundraising and advocacy) to support client relationships, customization, data-collection and data-mining cost effectively.
- Ensure that the communications needs of client groups are well understood and that the Web site is designed to meet those needs.
- Develop an understanding of the principles of good Web design and examine Web design from a user perspective. (Particular attention should be paid to usability but also to the host of ethical issues raised regarding disclosure of information sources, privacy and the like).
- Consider the “competition,” exploring other organizations' Web sites, particularly those regarded as exemplary.
- Explore the potential of “persuasive technologies” to address experiential as well as informational aspects of communications via the Internet and Web.
- Ensure the organization's Website is supported appropriately to ensure it delivers upon its potential (e.g., updates, feedback and the like).

The study is limited in a number of respects, and further work is needed to assess the role of IT generally and Web sites particularly. More detailed metrics are available to measure design features of Web sites (Ivory, Hearst and Sinha 2001; Ceaparu and Shneiderman 2002), features assessed subjectively in this study. An investigation of these heuristics would provide new insights related to accessibility and usability of the sites.

In addition, the assessment of functionality, design and usability was conducted without detailed information regarding organizational objectives,

intended audience or Web-site usage data. Further work is needed to refine the categorization of voluntary organizations in terms of sector, function and size. It is fairly obvious, for example, that large well-funded voluntary organizations are more likely to have the resources and expertise needed to develop, support and maintain a high-quality Web site and necessary information infrastructure than many small voluntary organizations.

It is therefore not surprising to find that many of the organizations that were rated the highest in terms of Web site design are also large, well-established voluntary organizations. At the same time, this preliminary review of the data would suggest that many large, well-funded organizations have not done a particularly good job of planning, designing or managing their Web sites. Further research, using surveys and in-depth interviews with the voluntary organization in question, would also illuminate the objectives and perceived value of these Web sites, their intended users and target audiences, and the actual usage metrics. A more detailed evaluation of a smaller group of voluntary organizations from the perspective of their target audience would provide a more nuanced assessment of their role and effectiveness. Further work may include user surveys and focus groups, for example.

Finally, the field of Web site usability and design remains wide open. In particular, exploring further the relevance of informational versus experiential approaches may be germane within the goals of nonprofit organizations' fundraising, education and advocacy efforts. In addition, further work is needed to explore the assessment criteria that are important to clients and to the public for voluntary organizations—such as accuracy, disclosure of sources and privacy.

Although the “digital divide” normally describes the gap between those who have access to the Internet and those who do not, the very definition of “access” is an issue to be further examined, particularly in terms of its impact on the individuals and organizations participating in the voluntary sector. “Access” is not merely a function of the availability of the technological infrastructure, but also a function of the knowledge, resources and skills needed to use the technology effectively. This study suggests a number of avenues for further research to explore what “access” means in the context of Canada's voluntary organizations and to explore how this “digital divide” is manifested.

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APPENDIX A: LIST OF ORGANIZATIONS INCLUDED IN ANALYSIS

Organization	Category	URL
AIDS Committee of Toronto	health	http://www.actoronto.org
Alcohol and Drug Concerns Inc.	health	http://www.concerns.ca
Alliance for Employment Equity	equality seeking/human rights	http://www.Web.net/~allforee
Alzheimer Society of Canada	health	http://www.alzheimer.ca
Amnesty International Canada	equality seeking/human rights	http://www.amnesty.ca
Anglican Church of Canada, General Synod	faith	http://www.anglican.ca
APEC Alert!	political	http://www.cs.ubc.ca/spider/fuller/apec_alert
Arthritis Society, National Office	health	http://www.arthritis.ca
Association for the Neurologically Disabled of Canada	health	http://www.and.ca
Association of Fundraising Professionals	other: fundraising	http://www.afpnet.org
Association Resource Centre (ARC) Inc.	other: consultant	http://www.associationconsultants.com
Asthma Society of Canada	health	http://www.asthma.ca
Big Brothers and Sisters of Canada	youth services and support	http://www.bbsc.ca
Boys and Girls Clubs of Canada	youth services and support	http://www.bgccan.com
Brain Tumor Foundation of Canada	health	http://www.btfc.org
Breast Cancer Society of Canada	health	http://www.bcsc.ca
Builders Without Borders	social support	http://www.landcentre.ca/builders/
Campaign Life Coalition	political	http://www.lifesite.net/clc
Canada Council for the Arts.	arts	http://www.canadacouncil.ca
Canada Dance Festival	arts	http://www.canadadance.ca
Canada Family Action Coalition	political	http://www.familyaction.org
CANADA Literacy Foundation	education	http://www.abc-canada.org
Canada Tree	arts	http://www.canadatree.com
Canada West Foundation	research	http://www.cwf.ca
Canada World Youth /Jeunesse Canada Monde	youth services and support	http://www.cwy-jcm.org
Canadian AIDS Treatment Information	health	http://www.catie.ca
Canadian Arctic Resources Committee	environment	http://www.carc.org
Canadian Association of Food Banks	health	http://www.icomm.ca/cafb
Canadian Celiac Association	health	http://www.celiac.ca

Organization	Category	URL
Canadian Children's Book Centre	education	http://www.bookcentre.ca/
Canadian Conference of the Arts	arts	http://www.ccarts.ca
Canadian Council for International Co-operation	development	http://www.Web.net/ccic-cci
Canadian Council on Social Development	development	http://www.ccsd.ca
Canadian Environmental Law Association	environment	http://www.cela.ca
Canadian Environmental Network	environment	http://www.cen-rce.org
Canadian Health Coalition	health	http://www.healthcoalition.ca
Canadian National Institute for the Blind	social support	http://www.cnib.ca/index.htm
Canadian Nature Federation	environment	http://www.cnf.ca
Canadian Opera Company	arts	http://www.coc.ca
Canadian Palliative Care Association	health	http://www.cpa.net/home.htm
Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society	environment	http://www.cpaws.org/
Canadian Parks Partnership	environment	http://www.canadianparkspartnership.ca/English/CCPframeset.htm
Canadian Peace Alliance	peace	http://www.acp-cpa.ca
Canadian Pediatric Society	health	http://www.cps.ca/english/index.htm
Canadian Porphyria Foundation Inc	health	http://www.cpf-inc.ca/
Canadian Race Relations Foundation	equality seeking/ human rights	http://www.crr.ca/EN/default.htm
Canadian Red Cross	health	http://www.redcross.ca/english_index.html
Canadian Rural Revitalization Foundation	other	http://www.crrf.ca
Canadian Society for Asian Arts	arts	http://www.cic.sfu.ca/csaa/
Canadian Society of Association Executives	other: professional association	http://www.csae.com/
Canadian Special Olympics	other: sports	http://www.cso.on.ca/
Canadian Taxpayers Federation	political	http://www.taxpayer.com
Canadian Unitarian Council	faith	http://www.cuc.ca/
Canadian University College	education	http://www.cauc.ab.ca/
Canadian Women's Foundation	philanthropy	http://www.cdnwomen.org
Canadian Women's Health Network	health	http://www.cwhn.ca/indexeng.html
Canadians Concerned About Violence in Entertainment	other: media	http://www.media-awareness.ca/eng/med/home/advoc/c-cave.htm
CARE Canada	social support	http://www.care.ca
Careers the Next Generation	employment	http://www.nextgen.org/
Catholic Missions in Canada	faith	http://www.missioncanada.ca/
CAVEAT	justice	http://www.caveat.org
Centennial Infant and Child Centre	youth services and support	http://www.cicc.on.ca/

Organization	Category	URL
Center For Social Justice	development	http://www.socialjustice.org
Check Your Head	other	http://www.checkyourhead.org
Child Find Ontario	youth services and support	http://www.ontario.childfind.ca/
Children's Aid Foundation	philanthropy	http://www.cafdn.org/index2.html
Children's Wish Foundation of Canada	philanthropy	http://www.childrenswish.ca/wishen/home-e.html
Christian Blind Mission International Canada	health	http://www.cbmi-can.org/html/main.htm
Christian Children Fund of Canada	youth services and support	http://www.ccfcanada.ca/home.html
Coalition for Gun Control	health/justice	http://www.guncontrol.ca
Community Foundation of Canada	social support	http://www.community-fdn.ca/
Community Volunteer Connections	other: volunteer association	http://www.volunteercentre.org/
Co-Motion	other	http://www.comotionmakers.org
Concerned Kids	other: children	http://www.theconcernedkids.com
Consumers' Association of Canada	other: consumer	http://www.consumer.ca
Council For Canadian Unity	political	http://www.ccu-cuc.ca/index_en.html
Council of Canadians	political	http://www.canadians.org
Counseling Foundation of Canada	social support	http://www.counselling.net/index.htm
Crohn's and Colitis Foundation of Canada	health	http://www.cafc.ca/en/index.html
Curriculum Service Canada (CSC)	education	http://www.curriculum.org/csc/index.htm
CUSO	social support	http://www.cuso.org/home.asp
David Suzuki Foundation	environment	http://www.davidsuzuki.org
Democracy Street	political	http://www.democracy-street.tao.ca
Democracy Watch	political	http://www.dwatch.ca
Doctor Peter Centre	health	http://www.drpeter.org/
Donner Canadian Foundation	philanthropy	http://www.donnerfoundation.org/
Ducks Unlimited Canada	environment	http://www.ducks.ca/
Easter Seal Ability Council	social support	http://www.telusplanet.net/public/easter
EGALE Canada	equality seeking/human rights	http://www.egale.ca
Energy Probe	environment	http://www.energyprobe.org
Enviro-Coh Enhancement Society	environment	http://www.enviro-coh.org
Epilepsy Canada	health	http://www.epilepsy.ca
Fair Vote Canada	political	http://www.fairvotecanada.org
Families First Resource Society	social support	http://www.familiesfirst.ca
Federation of Ontario Naturalists	environment	http://www.ontarionature.org

Organization	Category	URL
Forest Action Network	environment	http://www.fanWeb.org
Foster Parents Plan	youth services and support	http://www.fosterparentsplan.ca
Foundation for Equal Families	political	http://www.ffe.ca
Foundation for Rural Living	social support	http://www.frl.on.ca
Fraser Institute	research	http://www.fraserinstitute.ca
Friends of Medicare	health	http://www.friendsofmedicare.ab.ca
Friends of the Nelson Mandela Children's Fund	youth services and support	http://www.cfnmcf.ca
Frontier College	education	http://www.frontiercollege.ca
Funding Matters Inc.	other: fundraising	http://www.fundingmatters.com
Gallery Stratford	arts	http://www.gallerystratford.on.ca
Generosity Without Borders Inc.	other: donation portal	http://www.generositas.com
Gideons International In Canada	faith	http://www.gideons.ca
Girl Guides of Canada, National Council	youth services and support	http://www.girlguides.ca
Globe Theatre Society	arts	http://www.globetheatrelive.com
Greenpeace Canada	environment	http://www.greenpeacecanada.org
Habitat for Humanity Canada Inc.	social support	http://www.habitat.ca
Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada	health	http://www.heartandstroke.ca
Historica Foundation of Canada	education	http://www.historica.ca
Hope for Children Foundation	philanthropy	http://www.ccas.toronto.on.ca
Humedica International Canada	health	http://www.humedica.org
Hunger Project	social support	http://www.thp.org
International Fund for Animal Welfare	environment	http://www.ifaw.org
International Institute for Sustainable Development	development	http://www.iisd.org
Invest in Kids Foundation	philanthropy	http://www.investinkids.ca
IOF Foresters	other: fraternal/ social	http://www.iof.org
J.W. McConnell Family Foundation	philanthropy	http://www.mcconnellfoundation.ca
Job Skills	employment	http://www.jobskills.org
John Howard Society of Canada	justice	http://www.johnhoward.ca
John P. Robarts Research Institute	research	http://www.rri.ca
Ketchum Canada Inc.	philanthropy	http://www.ketchumcanada.com
League of Canadian Poets	arts	http://www.poets.ca
MADD Canada	other health: injury prevention	http://www.madd.ca

Organization	Category	URL
Max Bell Foundation	philanthropy	http://www.maxbell.org
McLean Foundation	philanthropy	http://www.mcleanfoundation.on.ca
Medecins Sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders)	health	http://www.msf.ca/
Missionnaires de la Consolata (Canada)	faith	http://www.consolata.org
Na'amat Canada,	faith	http://www.naamat.com
National Ballet of Canada	arts	http://www.national.ballet.ca
National Ballet School	arts	http://www.nbs-enb.on.ca
National Firearms Association	political—sports	http://www.nfa.ca
Nature Conservancy of Canada	environment	http://www.natureconservancy.ca
Non-Smokers' Rights Association	health	http://www.nsra-adnf.ca
North-South Institute	research	http://www.nsi-ins.ca
Ontario Coalition Against Poverty	development	http://www.OCAP.ca
Operation Eyesight Universal World Headquarters	health	http://www.giftofsight.com
Operation Springboard	justice	http://www.operationspringboard.on.ca
Organization for Quality Education	education	http://www.oqe.org
Osteoporosis Quebec	health	http://www.osteoporose.qc.ca
Osteoporosis Society of Canada	health	http://www.osteoporosis.ca
Otonabee Conservation Foundation	environment	http://www.otonabee.com
Oxfam Canada	health	http://www.oxfam.ca
People for Education	education	http://www.peopleforeducation.com
Pollution Probe	environment	http://www.pollutionprobe.org
Project Ploughshares	peace	http://www.ploughshares.ca
Prostate Cancer Research Foundation of Canada	health	http://www.prostatecancer.on.ca
Public Interest Advocacy Centre	political	http://www.piac.ca
Rainforest Action Coalition	environment	http://www.ran.org
Ruckus Society	other	http://www.ruckus.org
Samuel and Saidye Bronfman Family Foundation	philanthropy	http://www.bronfmanfoundation.org
Save Our Sea (Shore) Coalition	environment	http://www.nsis.com/~egilsson/hereeither.htm
Schizophrenia Society of Canada	health	http://www.schizophrenia.ca
Scouts Canada, Chinook Region	youth services and support	http://www.chinook.scouts.ca
Sea Shepherd Conservation Society	environment	http://www.seashepherd.org
Sierra Club of Canada	environment	http://www.sierraclub.ca
Sierra Legal Defence Fund	environment	http://www.sierralegal.org

Organization	Category	URL
Sierra Youth Coalition	environment	http://www.sierrayouthcoalition.org
Social Investment Organization	other: ethical investing	http://www.socialinvestment.ca
SRS Vocational Services Society	employment	http://www.surreyrehab.bc.ca
Street Kids International	development	http://www.streetkids.org
Sunshine Dreams for Kids	health	http://www.sunshine.ca
Tetra Society of North America	health	http://www.reachdisability.org/tetra
Thalidomide Victims Association of Canada	health	http://www.thalidomide.ca
Third Sector Programme, School of Policy Studies	research	http://www.policy.queensu.ca/sps/ThirdSector/
Tides Canada Foundation	environment	http://www.tidescanada.org
Times Change Women's Employment Service	employment	http://www.timeschange.org
Tourette Syndrome Foundation of Canada	health	http://www.tourette.ca
UNICEF Canada	development	http://www.unicef.ca
United Church of Canada	faith	http://www.uccan.org
United Way of Canada - Centraide Canada	social support	http://www.unitedway.ca
Victorian Order of Nurses for Canada	health	http://www.von.ca
Volunteer Canada	Other: volunteer association	http://www.volunteer.ca
Walter and Duncan Gordon Foundation	philanthropy	http://www.gordonfn.org
Women's Legal Education and Action Fund	equality seeking/ human rights	http://www.leaf.ca
World Federation of Hemophilia	health	http://www.wfh.org
World Vision	social support	http://www.worldvision.ca
YMCA Canada	social support	http://www.ymca.ca
Youth Employment Project	employment	http://www.yepcanada.org
Youth Volunteer Corps of Canada	youth services and support	yvcc.ca
YWCA of Canada	social support	http://www.ywcacanada.ca