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Canadian culture hits ipods via new government site

By Kurt Eby — Created 01/18/2008 - 2:14pm

The **Department of Canadian Heritage** and the **National Arts Centre** opened a new window for Canadian culture with the January 14 launch of *Podcasts.Culture.ca*, the government's first directory of cultural podcasts.

The site is starting with a collection of about 300 podcasts related to everything from Canadian cuisine to education, film and urban life. Contributors can be from outside or within government, as long as they are "developing great cultural content," says Vladimir Skok, who as Heritage's director of eCulture is responsible for the entire *Culture.ca* portal. The new site will be regularly updated, with the task of finding new content falling to the NAC.

"The whole concept of a portal and the podcast portal within our site is that people know if there's something culture, if it's good, hopefully they can find it on *Culture.ca*," says Skok. "My objective is to increase the access and visibility of all that great stuff that exists out there. It's not always easy to find, you don't want Google results where you get four million results when you're looking for something."

Skok says Heritage turned to the NAC for its subject matter expertise, particularly in the performing arts. And with six ongoing podcasts of its own - including its popular NACOcast - the NAC is equally experienced in podcasting. It was NAC new media producer Maurizio Ortolani who conceived *Podcasts.Culture.ca* with Skok at March 2006's *Museums and the Web* conference in Albuquerque NM.

"We thought podcasts would be the perfect vehicle to represent content that's not already represented on *Culture.ca*," says Ortolani. "We can bring people to podcasts that don't already know about them and are looking for cultural content, as well as make another directory specifically geared to culture very accessible to people."

Increasing accessibility is key for government services that previously were available only to those who visited the nation's capital.

"We're a national organization with a national mandate, and yet we're here in Ottawa," says Ortolani about the NAC. "We can tour the orchestra and we can co-produce theatre across the country, but really that's not enough. The Web in general, and podcasting specifically, is a way that we can fulfill our mandate."

It's an idea that seems to be growing. In November *Canadian New Media reported* [0] on the cross-platform initiative between the **CBC** show *Who Do You Think You Are?* and **Library and Archives Canada**. Within hours of the program tracing the roots of famous Canadians originally airing, the Library and Archives website received tens of thousands of searches. Archives had always offered ancestry search capabilities, but the initiative made that known to a whole new audience.

By now being an aggregator of podcasts, *Culture.ca* hopes to achieve the same objective.

"This is a cultural public space online," says Skok. "It tries to drive Canadians who are interested in the type of content and material and discussions that are covered on the podcasts to it in the easiest way possible. And if it's not easy we'll work hard on making it easier in the future."

Canadians aren't the only ones accessing Canadian cultural content online. Ortolani says about 40-50% of the feedback the NAC gets on its podcasts is international. Skok adds that *Culture.ca* gets visitors from 155 countries, with 10-20% of the sites traffic being international.

"It really extends what this department's all about: sharing Canadian stories with the world," says Skok. "We are focused on Canadians, that's our mandate, but we know very much that it's our national cultural portal and we're hoping the podcasts will just extend that....and will show how cool, creative and diverse we are, and how very much we embrace that."
