

Canadian Literature Online

Northwest Passages, the Internet, and Knowledge Management

Paul Martin

Northwest Passages sells only Canadian fiction, poetry, drama, and literary criticism. The oldest entirely-online seller of new books in Canada, it is also the most detailed online information resource on Canadian literature and writers. Created by Paul Martin, a PhD candidate in Comparative Literature at the University of Alberta, and Rob Stocks, founder and president of a leading B.C. web development firm, Mediaweb Solutions, Northwest Passages, in both its development and present state, is rooted in issues of managing, distributing, and producing knowledge.

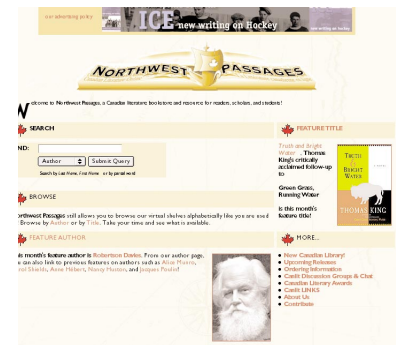
Knowledge, niche marketing, and NWP

Northwest Passages: Canadian Literature Online is a company that owes both its genesis and continued operation to questions of knowledge management. When, in late 1995, Rob Stocks and I came up with the idea of an all-Canadian literary Internet bookstore, our idea was only possible through a combined audit of our own intellectual assets. Between my own knowledge of both studying and teaching Canadian literature and Rob's experience as an entrepreneur and, at that time, a fledgling web developer, we envisioned a site that would foster a greater Canadian presence on the World Wide Web while, at the same time, becoming a successful Internet business. We recognized that if our site were to succeed, though, it would need to place content over commerce, knowledge over numbers of books sold. Our belief was, and still is, that if Northwest Passages were to have any impact on the literary and



www.nwpassages.com

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academic communities it would need to focus more on the management, dissemination, and, ultimately, production of knowledge about Canadian literature than on the actual selling and marketing of the books themselves. As our site came into being in the wake of Amazon.com – but long before any Canadian companies of this kind – we aimed to create a site that would take a different approach than that of the Internet superstore, a business plan that has, of course, since been mimicked by everyone from Indigo.ca to radioshack.ca. Rather than providing something for everyone, Northwest Passages would offer everything for someone.

Our plan to create a bookstore and information resource organised around such a small niche market stemmed from our recognition that anyone seeking to broaden their knowledge of Canadian literature would find very little on the Internet to assist them. Even in terms of the simplest questions of which books were available in Canada, there was almost no information to be found. In the case of Amazon, for instance, many people often use it only to determine whether a book they remember is still in print, or to learn the publication date of a book they are eagerly awaiting. Amazon, however, lists primarily books that are available in the United States; the same titles in Canada may have different publishers, not to mention prices and publication dates. Initially, then, many people were searching Amazon for information about Canadian books not available in the United States and falsely concluding that these particular titles were not available.

Northwest Passages was the first online book site in Canada to resolve this situation. By creating from scratch a database of solely Canadian literary titles, we not only provided a Canadian source for this information, but also addressed some of the shortfalls in the standard database used by most Canadian booksellers which sometimes overlooks some backlist titles and even the entire offerings of some smaller publishers. Compared to the millions of books listed by Amazon.com (which includes a not insignificant proportion of books that are either out of print, unavailable for other reasons, or not yet published), the Northwest Passages

More and more websites seem to be taking the superstore approach. Radioshack.ca, for instance, recently entered into a partnership with Chapters.ca that will see the former adding the sales of books to their site and the latter starting to sell home electronics.

database contains listings for roughly three thousand books. To a certain degree, a database of this size allows users to browse or at least scan the titles in alphabetical order, a capability that we have found causes them to discover books and authors they might not have otherwise known about or thought about looking for. A vastly larger database makes this virtually impossible; one essentially needs to go to that type of site knowing what one is looking for in order to find it.

Most importantly, the creation of our own database from scratch was a tremendously important process in our development as a knowledge organisation. By scouring catalogues from every publisher of even a few Canadian literary titles, and maintaining regular contact with their representatives, we acquired a significant amount of knowledge that covered everything from the workings of various publishing and distribution companies to the publication history and status of countless individual titles. It is this very type of knowledge that has become one of the most valuable assets to our business, as it is to most independent booksellers. In the face of the larger bricks-and-mortar chain stores and their online equivalents, it is *knowledge* and not prices, delivery time, or creating the most pleasant shopping experience that gives us a competitive edge in being able to serve the needs of our niche customers. What the big box store – whether real or virtual – deems to be its primary strength, then, can be turned around by the niche-market-driven store to become the behemoth's downfall. As the old adage says, size matters. In the case of Northwest Passages, however, we've proven that a business with a highly limited scope not only has a place on the Internet, but also has the potential to thrive in ways of which the larger players are incapable. And mostly, the foundation of this strength lies in our ability and willingness to accumulate, disseminate and ultimately produce knowledge.

Two Kinds of Knowledge

One of Samuel Johnson's more famous observations, as reported by Boswell, is that "knowledge is of two kinds. We know a subject ourselves, or we know where we can find information upon it" (p. 365). Our decision to develop Northwest Passages as a site laden with content stemmed from our recognition that we possessed and could share both of these types of knowledge. In terms of that which "we know [. . .] ourselves," some of the most valuable and frequently used parts of our site are the author biographies and bibliographies that we try to publish on a monthly basis. Though busy seasons for orders and other events in our lives have sometimes prevented us from updating this part of the site as much as we would like, over the four years we have been in operation we have managed to create an online library of reasonably detailed profiles of over twenty-five authors and their works. The subjects of these profiles range from some of the most famous Canadian writers, including Timothy Findley and Margaret Laurence, to those who are much less known, such as Jacques Poulin and Marion Douglas. The goal of these profiles, then, is only in part to collect and consolidate existing knowledge about the lives and works of the standard Canadian authors taught and read around the world. By featuring less famous writers who, we feel, deserve greater recognition, we are also endeavouring to produce new knowledge on the part of our users. By assembling what are frequently very extensive bibliographies of books and articles about the works of our feature authors, we are also sharing information that will foster the ability of our users, many of whom are students or professors from outside of Canada, to gain an even greater knowledge of the subject. The fact that these profiles and bibliographies are, without a doubt, the most frequently visited and linked-to pages of our site attests to the value this content. In fact, many current high school and university textbooks list the URLs to these pages, directing their students to Northwest Passages as a means of furthering their knowledge of the subject.

The second reason Northwest Passages has become a popular resource site on Canadian literature is because of our knowledge of, as

See Boswell, James (1791). *The Life of Samuel Johnson*. Vol. 2. London: Oxford University Press, 1933.

Johnson puts it, “where we can find information upon it.” In most cases, the information available at Northwest Passages has simply been collected and assembled by us in one place. A popular part of our site, for instance, is our list of literary awards and their past winners. At the time when Rob assembled our listings of past winners of the Governor General’s Literary Award, an award offered annually since 1937, this information was offered nowhere on the Internet (it can now also be found at the site of the Canada Council, which administers the annual awards). Even though this site has no intrinsic commercial value – the vast majority of winning titles have long since gone out of print and are thus not available for sale at Northwest Passages – its value lies in our users’ knowledge that these listings are readily available at our website. Even more valuable as a generator of traffic and reputation is our links page. With over 700 links to other sites containing information about Canadian literature, the page makes tangible some of the knowledge we have acquired in our years of mining the web for such information, and then shares it with our users. Always one of the top few pages on our site, it again is not something that directly sells books; in fact, the links page inevitably leads users away from our site rather than keeping them there. By furthering the user’s understanding and awareness of Northwest Passages as a knowledge organisation, though, such pages increase our value exponentially when compared to anything a purely sales-oriented site might offer, such as discounts or free shipping. Moreover, knowledge of this kind costs little to produce and distribute over the Internet – the only resource it consumes is time and energy. While our early and current competitors all invested heavily in e-commerce sites with all the technological bells and whistles and, as a result, either went bankrupt or are somehow managing to stay afloat on the promise of eventual profit, Northwest Passages remains a primarily text-based site which, short of a low four figure initial investment, has always made enough money to support itself and, though very infrequently, its owners.



NWP’s Canadian Literature Links
[www.nwpassages.com/
canlitlinks.asp](http://www.nwpassages.com/canlitlinks.asp)

Canadian Literary Awards @ NWP
www.nwpassages.com/awards.asp

Knowledge Management Leads to Knowledge Production

As our reputation has grown over the last four years, our status as a knowledge organisation has increasingly begun to show dividends in terms of book sales. Once again, this results from more and more clients becoming aware of Northwest Passages as a possessor of both kinds of knowledge described by Johnson. With Canadian literature increasingly becoming the hot “new” national literature on the world stage, international clients frequently come to our site looking for a particular title they are unable to find where they live. In a growing number of cases, these clients are professors who want to teach a book such as Timothy Findley’s wonderful novel *Not Wanted on the Voyage*, or Anne-Marie MacDonald’s play *Good Night Desdemona, Good Morning Juliet*, but are told by their college or university bookstore that the book is unavailable. With our help, the stores are able to obtain these books, and they place their orders with us each subsequent time the book is taught. With further investigation, they might be able to find more inexpensive ways to do this, but they are more than happy to give their business to us in return for the knowledge we are able to provide them. More recently, larger institutional clients have been giving us business based on what we know rather than just on what we know how to obtain. One of the Canadian embassies in the Middle East, for instance, has used our service to help establish two separate Canadian Studies libraries in their country. Unlike the other Canadian Studies libraries of varying sizes in the Czech republic, Italy, and the United States that we have helped to stock, in this case we were simply given a budget and free reign to use our expertise to choose what we knew to be important books in the fields of Canadian literature, history, politics, art, geography and sociology. In any case, whether we are stocking a library, a classroom, or simply recommending a book, author, or website an individual client might enjoy, Northwest Passages is engaged in more than the management of knowledge. We are, in the end, actively engaged in the process of shaping and even producing the knowledge our

To our surprise, Northwest Passages’ experience as an online merchant and information resource has even come to be an “intangible asset” of value to others. Our experiences over the last four years have given Rob a competitive edge when dealing with clients and when designing e-commerce sites. We have also been asked to speak about Northwest Passages and e-commerce at academic conferences, meetings of publishers’ groups, and for the recent book *Selling Online* by Canadian Internet gurus Jim Carroll and Rick Broadhead.

clients have of Canadian literature and, especially in the case of our international clientele, of Canada itself.

New Challenges in Knowledge Management

To conclude, I want to address some of the recent difficulties Northwest Passages has faced, in part because of its growing status as a knowledge organisation. One of the first and most immediate effects of setting ourselves up as experts in the field is that on a nearly daily basis we receive inquiries from people – mainly students – asking for everything from the home addresses of their favourite writers to advice on how to become a writer to questions like the following, received right around term paper time: “TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN; I WAS HOPING THAT YOU COULD SEND ME SOME INFO ON DAPHNE MARLATT’S NOVEL ‘ANA HISTORIC.’ I WOULD LIKE TO KNOW THE MEANING BEHIND WHAT THE WATER SYMBOLIZES AND THE TREES. CAN YOU REPLY AS SOON AS POSSIBLE? THANK-YOU VERY MUCH.” Foolishly, perhaps, we endeavour to respond to every message, even if our reply is merely a polite recommendation that the correspondent re-read the book and go do some research in the library. Ultimately, though, these tasks, along with filling customer orders and researching requests for out-of-print books takes time away from improving precisely that which has brought us this work in the first place – content and, more importantly, knowledge. If the content of our site and our status as a knowledge organisation has increased our sales, our sales figures have not been similarly beneficial to the knowledge side of our business. Once our sales are of a sufficient volume, however, we will be more able to bring in other people whose work will free Rob and me to work again primarily on the site’s content. Even this shift of responsibility, though, brings on new knowledge management challenges. As both Rob’s and my other careers have grown more demanding over the last couple of years, our wives, Sarah Bagshaw and Mona Martin, have helped to pick up the slack at Northwest Passages. However, both women, whether updating our database in

Mona's case or doing customer service and order fulfillment in Sarah's, have encountered difficulties doing work which requires in some degree a great deal of the tacit knowledge Rob and I have acquired over the last four years. The new challenge for us as a knowledge organisation, then, is to begin to manage adequately our organisational knowledge. Only then, it seems, will we be able to achieve the necessary balance between content and commerce that we will need to realise our full potential.