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# **Political Web Sites: Strategic Assets or Virtual Lawn Signs?**

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Behind the Curve: Canadian vs. US  
Political Web Sites in the 2004  
Electoral Cycle

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A Hillwatch E-Services Online Campaign  
Benchmark Report

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Prepared by:  
Hillwatch E-Services

### **About Hillwatch**

Based in Ottawa, Ontario and Boston, Massachusetts, Hillwatch Inc. e-Services provides comprehensive e-strategies built around issues and communities and unique performance evaluation products for the public, private and non-profit sectors. We help organizations develop web strategies that integrate and complement all aspects of their business, advocacy and communications objectives.

Find out more about Hillwatch by visiting our site, [www.hillwatch.com](http://www.hillwatch.com).

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## Table of Contents

Analysis.....	1
Introduction .....	1
Research Summary .....	1
Summary overall findings .....	3
Situational Awareness Report – Positioning.....	4
Situational Awareness Report – Quartile Analysis .....	6
Political Site Content Typology .....	11
Rationale and Methodology .....	14
Hillwatch E-Services .....	14
Why an e-Impact Benchmark?.....	14
Goal of the e-Impact Benchmark.....	14
What it is .....	14
How it works .....	15
Clients of Hillwatch E-Services:.....	17

# Analysis

## Introduction

The use of the Internet for political campaigning has evolved from a trendy novelty in the mid-90's to an accepted and integral element of a campaign managers' tool set. With each electoral cycle the web envelope has been pushed as new and more sophisticated approaches and tools emerge. From the online brochures of just a few years ago, campaign web sites now support and extend efforts to reach and engage voters, are used to test market campaign messages, and even to map supporters to electoral districts. The level of investment we see today directly reflects both the success of these initiatives, as well as a clear understanding that the value of the medium to the campaign process will only continue to grow.

With the Canadian election in full flight, now is the ideal time to benchmark how, and how well, Canadian political parties are making use the online medium. This report presents the results of a Hillwatch e-Impact Benchmark performed between June 2 and 12<sup>th</sup> on the web sites of five Canadian political parties engaged in the federal election (the Liberal, Conservative, NDP, Bloc Quebecois, and Green Parties). In addition, it benchmarks the web sites of the John Kerry and George Bush in the United States for comparative purposes.

The analysis contained in this report is based on the use of Hillwatch's proprietary web site benchmarking methodology, which checks for the presence or absence of online best practice indicators. This approach yields rigorous comparative analysis based on objective and quantifiable criteria. The benchmarking results are reported using a modified balance scorecard format that enables site managers to assess the alignment of the web site strategic goals to their execution on the site.

Hillwatch has completed hundreds of online benchmarks across a range of industry sectors, government departments, and non-profit organizations. This is the first such use of the benchmark to the political arena and was undertaken to understand the relative strengths, uses and positioning of the various political organizations. The concurrence of the Canadian and US election cycles was an opportune coincidence that allowed us to compare Canadian sites to each other and the hyper competitive online juggernauts of the American presidential contenders.

## Research Summary

There are clear and substantive differences in the strategic uses and tactical implementations of the political web sites studied. Key differences include:

- US political websites are core strategic assets of the campaign. Their meticulously designed interfaces, carefully tailored and targeted content, and highly evolved campaign tools underscore the central role these sites have in raising money, organizing the grassroots, targeting core communities, boosting supporters and communicating core messages.
- Canadian sites reflect a top down command-and-control campaign model. The information flow is largely unidirectional - from the party to the public/supporters. The NDP was the lone standout in this area with its e-campaigner site, although this was very late, limited and relied largely on party headquarters providing the initial push to get supporters active in engaging their peers. In contrast, US sites use a more

decentralized model where local chapters can access tools, materials and messages and work more independently.

- Canadian sites do not enable party grassroots to "self serve". They offer no substantive means through which party grassroots can organize, mobilize, share practices, download key campaign tools, and coordinate outreach. Canadian sites resemble electronic lawn signs – they inform but don't engage. They rarely take the next step of providing clear opportunities and avenues for engagement.
- Canadian sites have yet to crack the online fundraising nut. While the US campaigns have been very successful<sup>1</sup> at raising significant funds from supporters, Canadian sites still lag significantly in this key area. Although the websites make online contributions a straightforward process, they present blank forms that do not make linkages to the overall campaign agenda and are absent of compelling messaging; they are not couched within other calls to action or with issues that potential donors may feel passionate about.
- US sites are content rich, hosting more than twice the content of their Canadian counterparts. This substantial content difference reflects a higher degree of tailoring to various target audiences and a greater degree of sophistication in the area of online contributions. This is significant because the finely tailored content aligned by community interest ensures that there are more opportunities for the platform to resonate with pockets of voters.
- Money matters. The JohnKerry.com and GeorgeWBush.com sites are multi-million dollar investments in both technology and labour. They reflect the reality of the "permanent campaign" having been in high gear for quite some time now. They are kinetic, always evolving, not afraid to try new ideas and driven by a relentless focus on their core objective – to win the election. We recognize that it is not practicable to expect similar levels of investment by Canadian political parties in their online campaigns, but more focus would help. Remarkably, some of the most effective tools and approaches in the US are low cost but have still not been implemented by Canadian political sites. In a closely contested Canadian federal election, our political parties have been overlooking an opportunity to make themselves more competitive.

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<sup>1</sup> According to a recent analysis of the US based Campaign Finance Institute, small contributions nearly tripled between 2000 and 2004 from \$26 million to \$123 million in the presidential race largely due to the impact of Internet fundraising.

## Summary overall findings

Table I below presents the overall results from the benchmark. Each focus area has been assigned a colour code based its underlying result. Green indicates a result of 60% or more (highly competitive with peer sites and strong adherence to best practices), yellow a result from 50% to 59% (some things need to be fixed) and red a result of 49% or less (serious deficiencies)

**Table I: overall benchmarking results**

Focus areas	Democrats	Republicans	Liberals	Conservatives	NDP	Bloc Quebecois	Greens
Awareness & Profile	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Media	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Transparency	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Content	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Policies	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Usability	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Design	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Interactivity	●	●	●	●	●	●	●

Colour legend:

● = Site has multiple best practices   ● = Site is problematic   ● = Site has multiple issues

## Observations

Results across all the focus areas in Table I indicate:

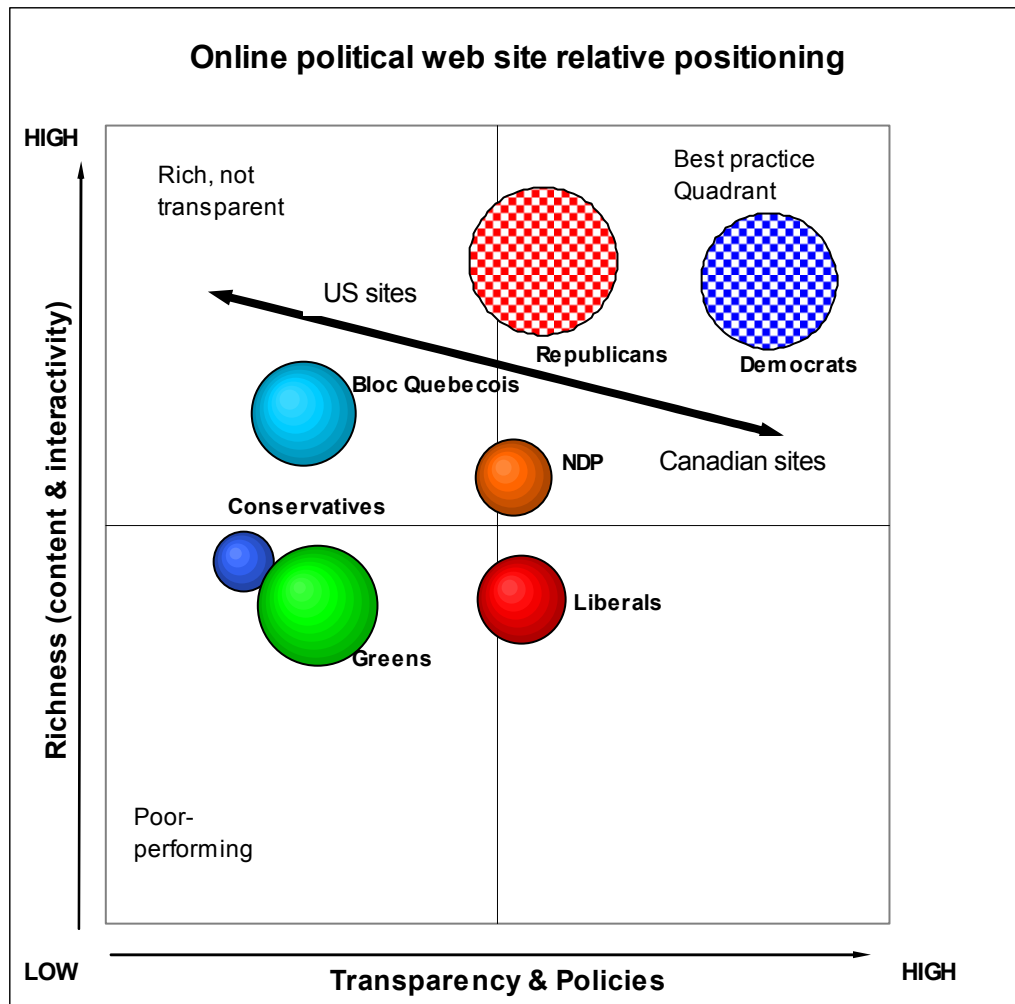
- The US sites incorporate more 'best practices' into their structure than do Canadian sites.
- Sections and information targeted at the media are less well executed by US sites relative to their Canadian peers. This may be due to the high degree of ongoing interaction between the press and the US candidates, which mitigates the value of the web site as a tool to connect with journalists. In contrast, the Canadian campaigns exhibited many best practices including third party news and articles, press secretary contact information and links to supporting documentation.
- At the time of writing, the major Canadian parties have done a poor job of search engine optimizing their sites. Random searches across all the major search engines on candidate names, their misspelled names, and party issues and platforms rarely provided consistent top or near top ranking results. Misspellings in particular were a case in point: "Steven" as opposed to "Stephen" Harper yielded no links or other results that would point a searcher in the direction of the Conservative leaders' page.
- Overall, the Bloc Quebecois site fared best among the Canadian sites. While the BQ site does not excel in any one area, it incorporates a good number of best practices across all focus areas. It has a broad range of content; a higher than average level of interactivity (it offers both a Blog and the ability for visitors to comment on any party issue, news release or other information item), aligns its content to demographic groups, and even includes a strong regional perspective to site content.
- The Conservative site had a lot of interesting elements and one of the strongest designs but it did not align content to target audiences, made only moderate use of email as a tool to connect with voters and supporters, and was poorly optimized for search engines.

- Transparency was a shortcoming for many of the political sites. Although all identified their sites as being authorized by their respective Agent, information about the Agent, the party structure or key staff contacts did not reflect best practices.
- Some Canadian sites miss such basic elements as a search feature, site maps breadcrumb navigation trails and print this page functionality.

**Situational Awareness Report – Positioning**

This three dimensional graph determines the sites’ position relative to one another using the following focus areas: Awareness & Profile, Content & Interactivity and Transparency & Policies – over 100 criteria in total. This graph provides a quick overview of the site’s ability to **pull** in an audience, **engage** its attention and present itself in a forthright manner.

This is a single snapshot of the relative positioning of all the analysed sites using these three key objectives and helps suggest how to focus future communication investments.



Graph I: Relative positioning of the peers sites within the campaign issue-space

**How to read this graph**

The size of the bubble is based on results from the Awareness & Profile focus area. The strength of the score is indicated by the size of the bubble (the higher the score, the larger

the bubble), which reflects the ability of the site to attract an audience. Content and Interactivity, important to engaging an audience are measured along the vertical axis. Transparency & Policies, which reflect the organizational and managerial elements of the site, are measured along the horizontal axis. Each site on this three dimensional graph is colour coded and separately identified.

## **Findings**

The key observations from this graph are:

- 1)** Both US sites fall within the best practice quadrant, reflecting their overall strong performance across all best practice indicators. They are clearly in a class apart from their Canadian counterparts;
- 2)** The Canadian peer group shows a wide variation, with only the NDP site falling within the best practice quadrant;
- 3)** The Liberals and NDP sites scored more strongly on the Transparency and Policies relative to the other Canadian sites.
- 4)** Canadian sites also distinguish themselves from one another by their level of Richness, with the NDP and Bloc Quebecois being significantly higher in this regard;
- 5)** US sites are more effective at building their Awareness and Profile – they are well optimized and have extensive links from third-party sources that drive traffic.

## **Implications**

- US campaign sites are clearly more competitive with respect to best practices relative to their Canadian counterparts. They have a greater ability to reach and attract audiences, engage their attention, raise their comfort level with the medium, eliminate barriers to action, and ultimately convert visitors to active supporters through compelling calls to action. Our experience is that sites that fall within the best practice quadrant inevitably deliver upon their strategic objectives and yield a high return on investment for the owners.
- In this case, the Canadian sites would appear to not be contributing substantially towards the strategic goals of their parties: reaching their grassroots, engaging them and getting them mobilized. The issues for Canadian campaign managers are: Are their sites more than just electronic lawn signs? Are they able to make use of the information gathered to generate traction among the grassroots? Is the site helping to manage and offload the organizing burden by empowering peer-to-peer action? If the answers to any of these questions is “no”, then the return on their investments will be sub-optimal.

## Situational Awareness Report – Quartile Analysis

The following series of graphs (Graphs II through VIII) bring together all the various focus areas of the e-Impact Benchmark. The goal is to provide a quick visual means to evaluate the performance of one site relative to the blended rankings of the peer sites.

### How to read these graphs

The graph depicts the degree to which the target site deviates from both the focus area average of all sites or best practice. The average score of all the sites studied is plotted as a yellow square against each focus area. The blue square represents the best practice threshold (the third quartile, i.e. 75% of the study sites were below this level). Finally, the red bar represents the score the target site received per focus area.

The objective is to minimize the gap between the top of the red bar and either of the two squares. In those instances where the bar graph exceeds the best practice value (the blue square), the target site is considered to represent a best practice case.

### Results

First and foremost, the target site should consistently score near or above the average across all focus areas. If this is not the case, the site is clearly less competitive within its peer group. A sign of a competitive site is one that scores consistently near or above the average, and further, scores in the best practice range (i.e. in the top 25% [third quartile] of its peer group) in at least two of the nine focus areas.

The following points are based on interpretation of the results presented in Graphs II through VIII.

#### Democrats

Outstanding peer-to-peer networking support and excellent calls to action tied to fundraising. The site delivers on messages aligned to trust and security crucial to generating online donations. Carries on the Dean Blogging philosophy of “letting a thousand flowers bloom”.

#### Republicans

Very high degree of interactive content elements designed to amusingly and effectively transmit key campaign messages and hold the visitor interest. High degree of third party linkage to the site ensures steady stream of visitors from Republican friendly organizations. Opponent research is highly evolved. Talk Radio Action Center & House Parties (Kerry now copying) are examples of innovative strategies to initiate voters to the party message and engage active supporters,

#### Liberals

Low content rating reflects unclear design goals due to the site doubling both as the election and the main party web site. This dual purpose negatively affects its strategic focus, and makes it somewhat difficult to orient oneself. Messaging and information architecture could be improved.

#### Conservatives

Much stronger content focus than the Liberal site, this site is clearly geared and focused on the election with issues and other core campaign messaging highlighted.

**NDP**

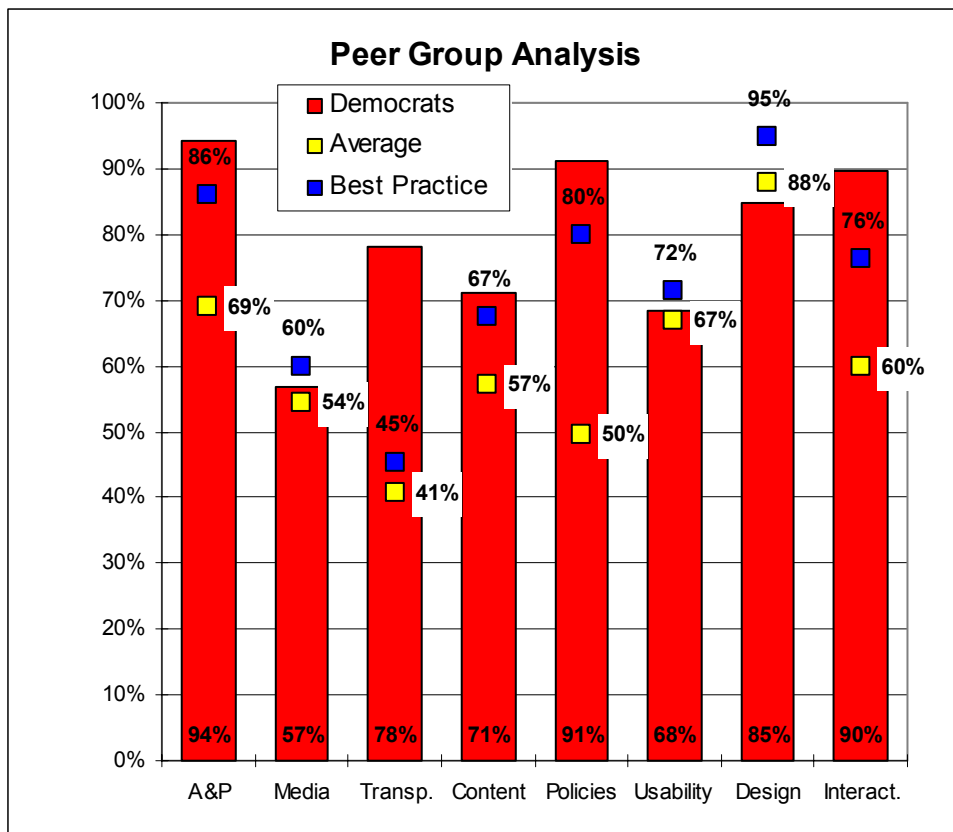
Distinguish themselves primarily due to e-campaigner feature. While innovative, this was launched mid-way through the election, which severely reduces the timeline over which it could have had impact.

**Bloc Quebecois**

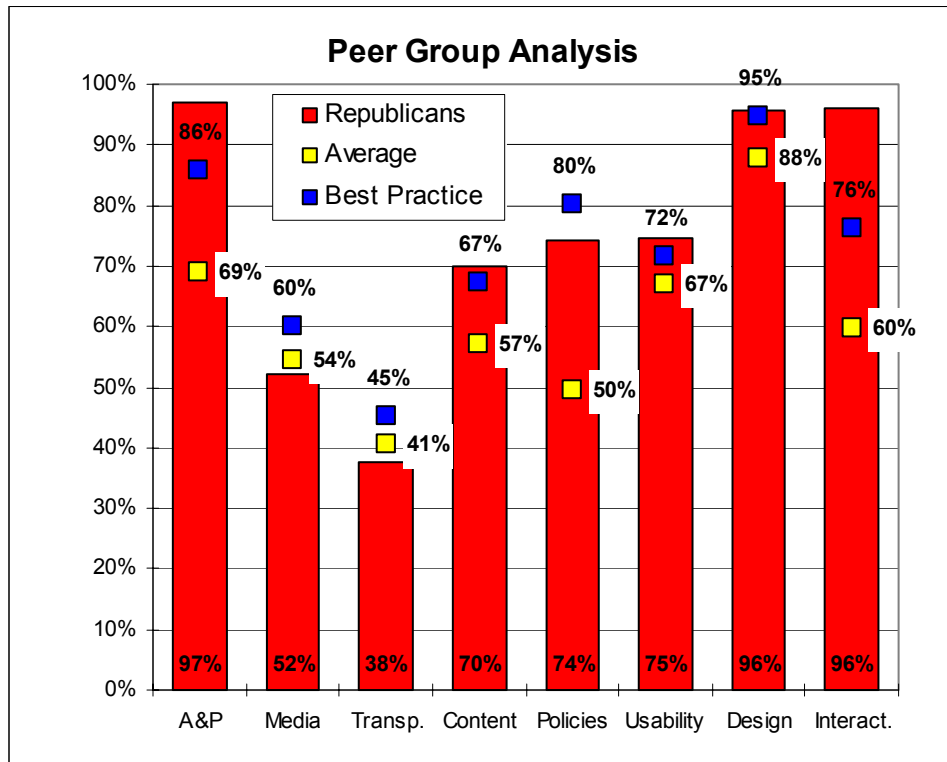
The site has a high degree of interactive elements and is one of the few to segment content according to demographic (and regional) affiliations. However no content is prioritized and it is unclear what the call to action is.

**Greens**

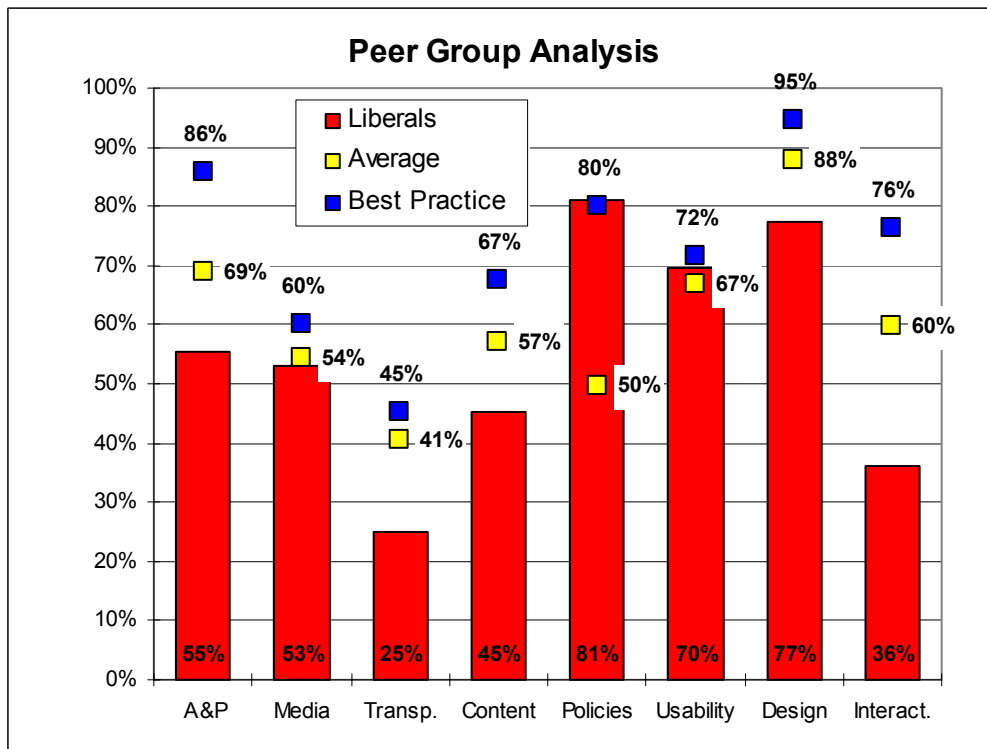
The site serves both as the party and the main election web site. Despite this dual role, it has been well optimized to capture visitors with broad environmental interests and steer them towards the Green electoral platform. It is one of the few sites to provide extensive links and information on its party leadership.



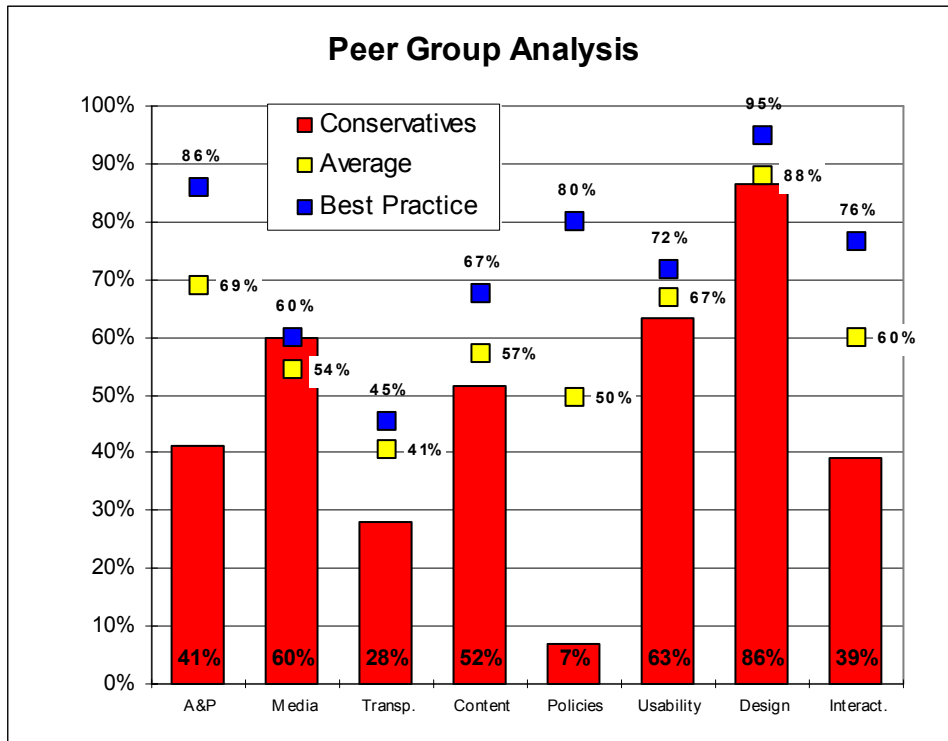
**Graph II: Quartile Analysis of Benchmark scores (Democrats vs. all other sites)**



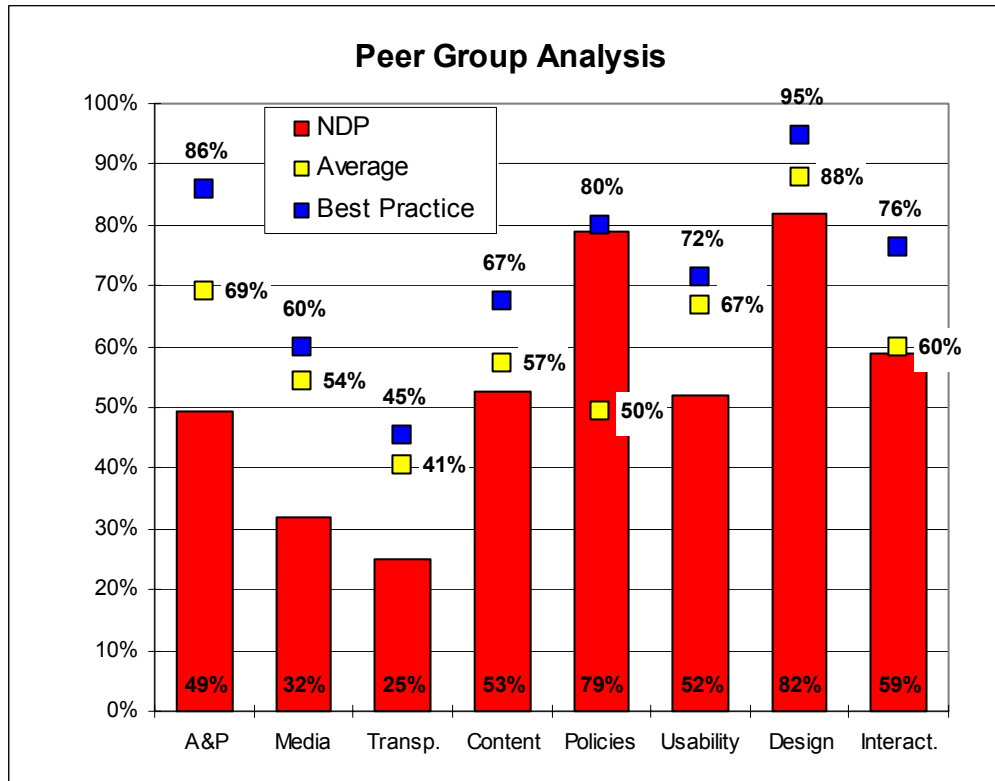
Graph III: Quartile Analysis of Benchmark scores (Republicans vs. all other sites)



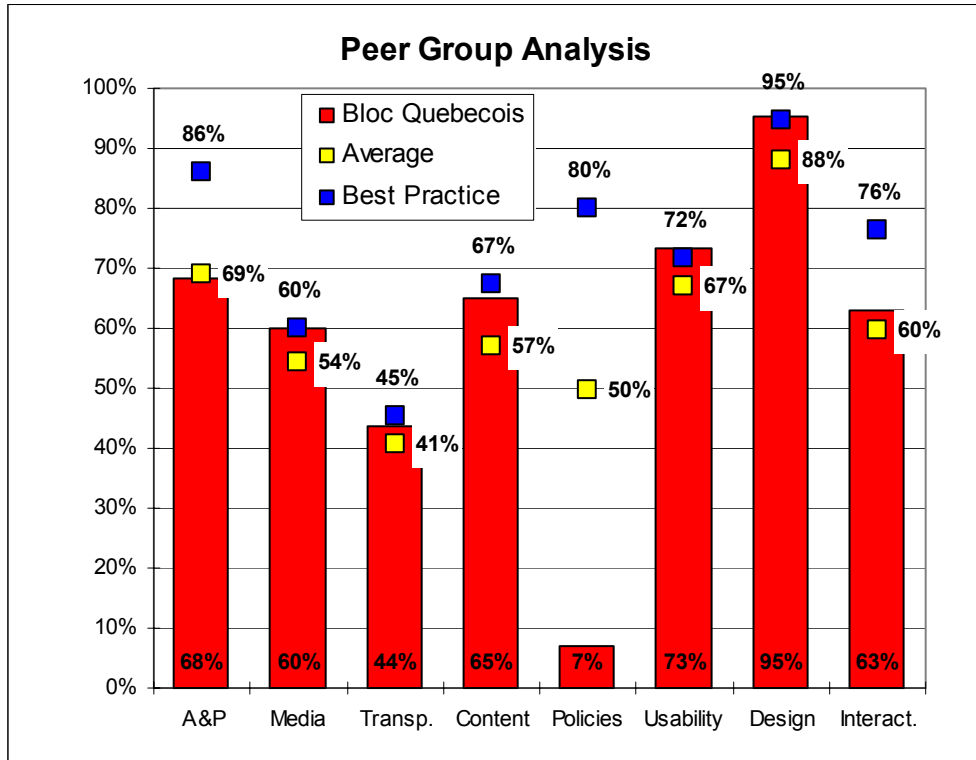
Graph IV: Quartile Analysis of Benchmark scores (Liberals vs. all other sites)



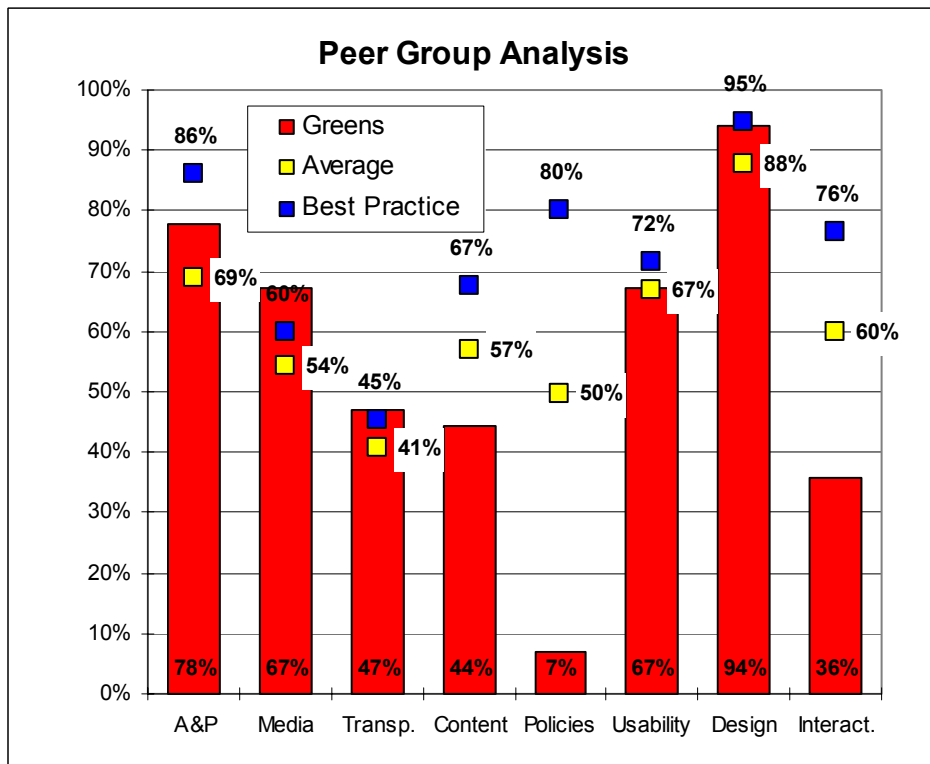
Graph V: Quartile Analysis of Benchmark scores (Conservatives vs. all other sites)



Graph VI: Quartile Analysis of Benchmark scores (NDP vs. all other sites)



Graph VII: Quartile Analysis of Benchmark scores (Bloc Québecois vs. all other sites)



Graph VIII: Quartile Analysis of Benchmark scores (Greens vs. all other sites)

## Political Site Content Typology

In addition to applying our Benchmark methodology, Hillwatch finds it useful to create content typologies that deconstruct a web site's content 'offerings' based on sector-specific content taxonomies. This allows our clients to use a structured framework to compare and contrast the content available on their web site against those of their peers or competitors. We believe this is a useful exercise given the key role of content in establishing a web sites' value proposition.

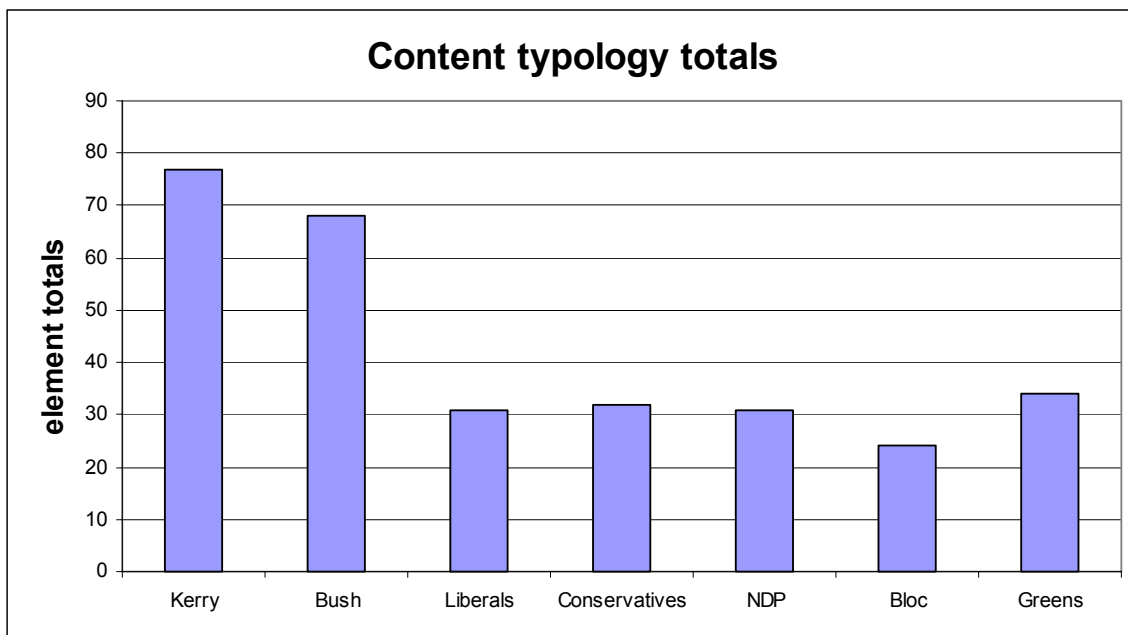
Over the past few years we have observed a convergence in the types of content found on political web sites. Hillwatch decided to explore this content convergence in detail and to that end, deconstructed the content types found on the seven political web sites that were the subject of the Benchmarking study, as well as a series of political sites from other jurisdictions worldwide. We were able to identify 99 distinct content types that fall within any one of 9 different taxonomic categories. These are:

- **Platform Information** – Content ranges from short issue briefs to detailed platform documents. Increasingly common is Opposition Research in which the opponent's statements, history, and biography can be sliced and diced from a number of different perspectives.
- **Candidate Information** – Static biographical information is being supplemented with photo galleries, 3rd party materials, Web media interviews or min documentaries, audio clips and even personal blogs. US sites tend to duplicate this pattern for both running mates and mates. Canadian sites are more circumspect about selling the candidate (and his/her family). Candidate calendars have become ubiquitous.
- **Media Centre** – Journalists are a special interest groups that now commonly receive their own web site section in which all press releases, media advisories, candidate statements, story lines, targeted issues briefs, speeches and 3rd party endorsements are housed.
- **Grassroots/Engage Volunteers** - Sites build loyalty by having viewers increasingly interact with the site and moving them towards a series of desired actions. These range from basic tools (search, site maps) including the typical viral tools (send to a friend, e-mail & contact information capture) that elicit some level of viewer engagement and take-up of site content and provide options to learn more about the campaign or to contact it or be contacted directly. Increasingly sophisticated tools included campaign polls, detailed volunteer segmentation and targeted action and volunteer meeting facilitation. Voter registration is a US and not Canadian preoccupation.
- **Community Support/Target Voters** – Political campaigns target certain communities for support. There may be specific sections devoted to that communities' interests, with endorsements form prominent community spokespeople, and specific issues/press releases of interest to that community or non-official language sites. Interactive features include targeted blog strategies, forums and chat centres
- **Donations/Raise Money** – The Internet's value as a fundraising tool has been one of the big news stories of the current electoral cycle. Sites distinguish themselves by how many different ways they can ask for donations, establish viral donation options or sell 'campaign' goods and even offload the cost of campaign material on to volunteers.

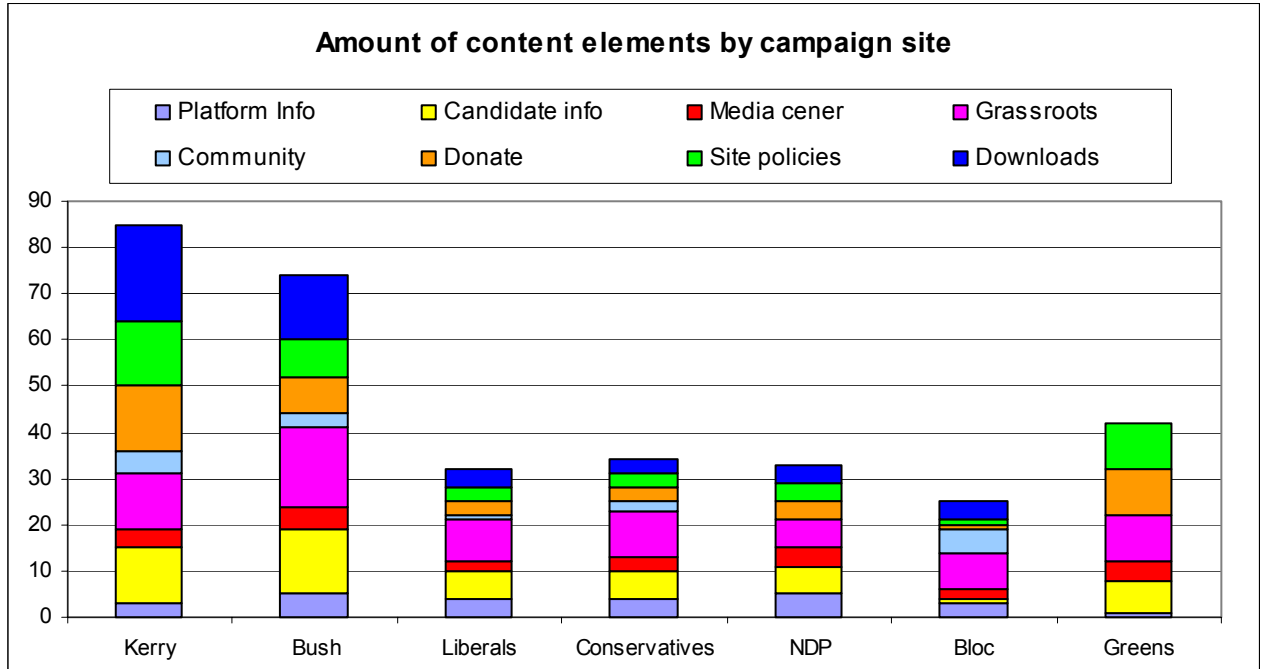
- **Site Policies** – Policies traditionally cover technical and privacy considerations but political sites also must present policies/assistance tied to electoral and financial contribution laws.
- **Downloads** – Allowing viewers to download materials (video & audio clip, music, buddy buttons, brochure, signs, etc.) is a way of creating connection and engagement with a campaign. It is also a simple practical way to distribute materials to active supporters for campaigns. The range of downloads available from sophisticated political sites has proliferated.

## Results

A comprehensive analysis of the seven campaign sites revealed a wide variation in the amount of content types, ranging from a high of 77 (for the John Kerry site) to a low of 31 (for the Bloc Québécois site). The results are presented in the following graph.



Graph IX: Content typology variations for campaign websites



Graph X: Content typology variations by content category for each campaign website

## Rationale and Methodology

### Hillwatch E-Services

#### Providing Web Site Performance Measurement Frameworks for the Public and Non-Profit Sector

Hillwatch e-Services has developed unique Web Performance Frameworks (WPF)™ to help government and non-profit clients analyze, measure, manage and continuously improve their web assets. The Hillwatch WPF combines two proprietary Hillwatch methodologies, the E-Impact Benchmark™ and Visitor Pattern Analytics, into a rigorous program of on-going performance evaluation designed to maximize the value and effectiveness of web sites. This current political party sites project was based on our Benchmark methodology.

#### Why an e-Impact Benchmark?

Commercial and e-business organizations are critically concerned with creating web sites that engage users and help move them from product interest to purchase decision seamlessly (i.e. without abandoning their “shopping cart in the aisle”). Given their considerable web site investments, they have developed objective measures and tools to evaluate the factors that enhance the likelihood of transaction fulfillment. Similarly, many government, advocacy and public organizations have made substantial investments in their web properties. However, to date there has not yet existed any means by which these sectors can evaluate the efficacy of their on-line initiatives beyond simple user log analysis.

The Hillwatch e-Impact Benchmark was developed to address this gap. The e-Impact Benchmark adapts many of key concepts underlying the evaluation tools and techniques developed for commercial web sites to the needs of policy-based web sites. Hillwatch seeks to provide clients with an understanding of how good their web sites are at both getting the message out and delivering ‘message fulfillment’, i.e. an increasing the number of people who read content.

#### Goal of the e-Impact Benchmark

The Hillwatch e-Impact Benchmark delivers actionable results based on the objective analysis of quantifiable data, which in turn helps clients to maximize the value of their Internet and web site investments.

#### What it is

The Hillwatch e-Impact Benchmark is a sophisticated methodology that specifically measures the performance of issue advocacy and public policy information sites using meaningful, consistent and quantifiable criteria. Among other things, it is designed to evaluate the degree to which policies or messages are successfully delivered to web site visitors – a concept we define as message-fulfillment. The e-Impact Benchmark brings together recognized best practices in the fields of communications, government relations, advocacy, community engagement and web site design into a set of objective and consistent criteria. Sites are evaluated against these criteria to define a baseline against which clear, fact-based recommendations can be developed. Given the innovative and constantly changing nature of this sector, the criteria are regularly updated to reflect evolving best practices.

## How it works

The Hillwatch e-Impact Benchmark uses a Balanced Scorecard approach and incorporates over 400 criteria distributed across 10 focus areas:

- 1) Awareness & Profile (A&P): a measure of the sites profile on the web as determined by a range of factors including (but not limited to) search engine rankings, links, use of meta tags, branding, collateral material, communication activities, etc.
- 2) Media Friendliness: reviews the factors that contribute to enhancing the usefulness of a website from a journalists perspective, with particular emphasis on news releases and contact information.
- 3) Transparency: Examines the availability and scope of information on site owners, their goals, mission, funding, board, governance, etc.
- 4) Content: Evaluates the segmentation, structure, amount, currency, and other aspects, which help make content useful & relevant to users.
- 5) Credibility: Looks at the elements, which encourage users to engage with the organization, as well as the process by which that engagement is supported. When applicable, this focus area also is designed to evaluate openness and clarity of an on-line consultations initiative.
- 6) Site Policies: reviews the existence and scope of the policies in place governing site privacy, email, content, copyright, security, etc.;
- 7) Usability: Evaluates the ease of use and other aspects that contribute to the user experience as measured through a human-factors approach;
- 8) Design: Reviews the key site design elements against recognized best practices in this focus area;
- 9) Visitor Patters: Analyses log files to determine key benchmarks and visitor trends over time; and
- 10) Interactivity: examines interactive factors on the site which promote retention, build mindshare and create relationships;

These focus areas address strategic aspects that are critical to effectively promoting a point of view in cyberspace and by extension, engaging a target audience. In addition, they check the tactical elements (i.e. the nuts and bolts) of a web site to ensure that simple technical and functional issues don't jeopardize the strategic goals of the organization. The target site is measured against a weighted scale for each criterion, the criteria are collected into factors, and the factors summed to give a ranking for each focus area. The results are presented as a series of graphs by focus area and component.

The target web site is also measured against a suite of peer or competitor sites that inhabit the 'issue neighbourhood'. Hillwatch benchmarks peer or competitor sites using the identical best practices indicators that it uses for the target/client site. A mix of domestic sites that oppose the target site goals, some who support them and some who are neutral are used in order to clearly understand competitive positioning of the web site within the defined issue space. This selection of sites is rounded out with a leading international site.

The results are presented as a single graph which positions the target site relative to those within the issue-neighborhood.

*For the purposes of this current study, we used the focus areas most appropriate for political party sites. We also created new indicators to specifically measure site features particularly appropriate for political sites. These were based on our subject site but also a review of select political party sites outside of North America. We additionally create a content typology of political party sites to further generate research findings and insights.*

For the sake of brevity, these study presents our main findings and do not include all the graphs, and most importantly the detailed actionable recommendations<sup>2</sup>, that are typically found in a Hillwatch E-Impact Benchmark Report which delivers a set of graphs and action items that are typically designed to:

- Enable objective analysis on site performance;
- Determine the position of their site relative to their issue competitors;
- Understand their variance from sites exhibiting best practices in their field
- Evaluate the degree of message-fulfillment;
- Identify problem areas;
- Provide a clear roadmap and workplan for site improvements; and
- Develop baseline data on site performance against which to gauge future progress.

In this instance, we have used our methodology to compare the relative evolution in terms of sophistication, tools and techniques between Canadian Political party sites themselves and American counterpart sites.

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<sup>2</sup> A Hillwatch E-Impact Benchmark Report typically delivers between four and six -dozen actionable recommendations for site improvement which Hillwatch present workplan style weighted by level of importance and effort.

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**Clients of Hillwatch E-Services:**

Hillwatch E-Services Government and non-profit clients have included:

- American Chemistry Council
- Canadian Biotechnology Advisory Committee
- Canada School for Public Management (formerly the Canadian Centre for Management Development)
- Canadian Chemical Producers Council
- Canadian Environmental Assessment Agency
- Canadian Food Information Council
- Canadian Forces Grievance Board
- Canadian Labour and Business Centre
- Friends of Canadian Broadcasting
- Health Canada – Canadian Health Network
- Health Canada – Communications, Marketing & Consultations Division
- Health Canada – Consultations Secretariat
- Health Canada – Healthy Environments and Consumer Safety Branch
- Industry Canada – Community Access Program (IHAB)
- Industry Canada – Grassroots SchoolNet (IHAB)
- Industry Canada – SchoolNet (IHAB)
- Mining Industry Training and Adjustment Council (MITAC)
- National Roundtable on the Environment & the Economy
- National Defence Canada
- Transport Canada