

# culture.mondo



CULTURAL PORTALS  
GATEWAYS TO A GLOBAL COMMONS

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## FOREWORD

Ten years ago, hardly anyone working in cultural development would have guessed the speed and magnitude with which online cultural portals would emerge. The WWW took off in 1990; the first 'Culturenets' appeared a few years later. In 2005 cultural portals have become an almost essential element in public policy toolkits across the globe.

For those of us involved in cultural portal development, advice remains scarce. In fora where e-culture management and policy are considered, the focus is more often on the practice of digitization. However, cultural portals have a different vocation and specific problems. While they range in size, scope, services and management structure, these online spaces have one thing in common - the drive to engage and excite people with the richness and diversity of culture and the ways that it shapes our lives.

Developing a successful portal and online brand is not easy. It is a crowded, competitive and commercial marketplace shaped by dominant technology and players. Cultural portals - as new public spaces, are successful when they are an alternative to mainstream entertainment sites, responding to a more subtle set of audience needs. At the same time, they must operate as good businesses and demonstrate clear measures of success in order to justify the support of the public purse.

As online publishers, cultural portals have responded to these challenges:

- Almost all are building comprehensive, authoritative, up to date listings services.
- Many offer routes into online collections.
- Others provide interactive tools.
- Some offer lively, daily editorial that contextualizes and enlivens cultural stories.
- Some provide a platform for citizens to express their own diverse voices.
- Some focus on an educational agenda to inspire learning.
- All are passionate about culture and its value to our world.

But what will these portals look like in five years? What will the virtual visitor of the future want to experience? How cultural portals develop their content and their operations, the ways they lead or follow new technologies, the partnerships they build and the rules that govern them will shape their success in this future.

The Culture.mondo network emerged in 2005 to help those of us who are conceiving, managing, marketing and funding cultural portals to better understand the complexity of these issues and explore their solutions. This report presents our first small steps towards an intensely collaborative global initiative. We look forward to learning together, reaching out and building some great online cultural experiences!

*Vladimir Skok*

Vladimir Skok Culture.ca / Culturescope.ca

*Jane Finnis*

Jane Finnis 24 Hour Museum (UK)

On behalf of the International Steering Committee

*Developing knowledge societies and promoting cultural diversity depend on real-life services that actively engage online users. The Culture.Mondo network is tackling these challenges by sharing experiences and expertise from portals across the globe. The survey uncovered fascinating insights into the contributions portals are making to cultural life, and is enabling international collaboration.*

David Dawson, Head of Digital Futures, MLA (UK)

A man with short dark hair is looking down at a small, light-colored ceramic bowl with a floral pattern. The background is dark, and the lighting is dramatic, highlighting the man's face and the bowl.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Objectives

The objectives of cultural portals, of the Culture.mondo network and of this publication itself are interconnected.

Although cultural portals are as diverse as the countries or cultural groups that build them, their creation is motivated by a common goal: to engage and inform citizens and to encourage them to explore their identity, culture and creativity.

From a handful of portals established in the mid 1990s, the field has expanded by the hundreds. Over 300 portals were identified and invited to participate in an online survey that was completed in early 2005. Many more cultural portals are under development. Culture.mondo has grown out of the intersecting and overlapping interests of individual cultural portals. This emerging, informal international network of portals seeks to encourage and advance communication among portal architects, developers, managers, promoters and funders; it also seeks to bring these conversations into the international arena.

Culture.mondo seeks to facilitate the development of an online global community of public cultural portals, as a vehicle for them to:

- Connect internationally;
- Share knowledge;
- Collaborate; and
- Disseminate best practices.

This publication, *Cultural Portals: Gateways to a Global Commons*, supports the Culture.mondo objective of sharing knowledge across the spectrum of cultural portals. It also sets out to describe the development and work of Culture.mondo and to situate the network and the cultural portals that fuel it within a wider digital conversation. International working groups such as Culture.mondo advance the discussions and actions that make the case for broad access to the Internet, thereby

embracing citizens worldwide and supporting a next generation of cultural creators, consumers and participants.

### Actions

To meet its objectives, Culture.mondo undertook to map the international field of cultural portals through an online survey that has provided a context for the development of the network, set the agenda for an international roundtable of cultural portals and informed this publication.

In inviting participation in the survey and the network, Culture.mondo has opted for an open and flexible definition of *cultural portal*, which includes national cultural portals, thematic portals and cultural observatories. Portals are most often national; however, some are regional (within or across national borders), or supranational.

The survey has shown that the number of portals is increasing at a phenomenal rate and that, collectively, they are reaching a global audience of millions. It has underscored the value of the cultural portal in ensuring access, embracing diversity and encouraging participation by citizens in their culture.

Issues and discussions presented in the publication often centre on portal visitors, Internet travellers who step through the gateway of the cultural portal and, in so doing, are invited onto a global commons of culture — intersecting and connecting with their own culture and with cultures from around the world

Culture.mondo designed and facilitated an International Roundtable of cultural portals held at Expo 2005, Japan (June 6–8, 2005) entitled “Cultural Portals: New Challenges and Good Practices.” Discussions focused on key management issues currently faced by portal architects: partnerships, governance, content management, and marketing and audience needs.



Eighteen cultural portals (from all regions of the world) and UNESCO participated in the Culture.mondo Roundtable. Participating portals reflected a range and diversity in nature, stage of development and scope and presented a mix of public, private, collaborative, national, regional and international cultural portals. As a result of this meeting, active membership in the network has more than doubled, with connections into all regions of the world.

Culture.mondo has established a Web presence at [www.culturemondo.org](http://www.culturemondo.org) where network members are kept apprised of activities, resources are available and links to over 80 cultural portals facilitate access to a wide range of cultural information.

## Future Plans

The Culture.mondo community of practice aims to increase participation from cultural portals and strategic bodies worldwide. Knowledge exchanged across portals will ensure that established portals can share best practices with each other and support the development of new portals around the world. However, information flows in many directions — the fresh take of emerging portals, the tenacity of less-resourced portals and the ingenuity of young portal architects will constantly provide new views and perspectives on the challenges of portal growth and development.

As it expands and grows, Culture.mondo is committed to maintaining an open, nimble and flexible organization that is responsive to the interests and aspirations of its portal members. Culture.mondo does not propose a multinational bureaucracy or a massive public-facing destination website. Culture.mondo is not tied to any one national agenda, or to a single approach to any aspect of portal design and management.



The network looks forward to exchange and collaboration with other related initiatives, regionally and multinationally, including MICHAEL, the InterAmerican Network of Cultural Policy Observatories of the Organisation of American States (OAS), the Network of Cultural Policy Observatories and UNESCO.

The network plans to seek out partners in order to undertake further research and information-sharing to support the exchange of knowledge between portals. This initiative will benefit both the portal builders and the individual citizens worldwide that enter into this new global commons through their chosen cultural portal gateways.

*Culture.mondo is an emerging, informal network that encourages and facilitates communication*

Vladimir Skok [Culture.ca/](http://Culture.ca/) [Culturescope.ca](http://Culturescope.ca)



## RESUMEN EJECUTIVO

### Objetivos

Los objetivos de los portales culturales, de la Red Culture.mondo y de esta publicación están interrelacionados.

Aunque los portales culturales son tan diversos como los países o las agrupaciones culturales que los construyen, su creación está motivada por un propósito común: involucrar e informar a los ciudadanos e incentivarlos a explorar su identidad, cultura y creatividad.

De un puñado de portales establecidos a mediados de los años noventa, su universo ha crecido notablemente. Más de 300 fueron identificados e invitados a participar en una encuesta por internet concluida a principios de 2005. Una cantidad superior de portales culturales está en desarrollo.

Culture.mondo surgió debido a los intereses de los portales culturales, los cuales se intersectan y se traslapan. Esta red informal y emergente de portales busca estimular la comunicación entre los arquitectos, desarrolladores, administradores, promotores y fundadores de dichos portales; también se propone llevar esta discusión al ámbito internacional.

Culture.mondo busca facilitar el desarrollo de una comunidad global en línea de portales culturales públicos, como un vehículo para que éstos:

- se conecten internacionalmente;
- compartan conocimientos;
- colaboren; y
- difundan mejores prácticas

Esta publicación, Portales culturales: puertas a la comunidad global, apoya el objetivo de Culture.mondo de compartir conocimientos entre el universo de portales culturales. Propone describir el desarrollo y el trabajo de Culture.mondo y situar esta red y a los portales culturales que la alimentan en una conversación digital más amplia. Grupos internacionales de trabajo como Culture.mondo impulsan las discusiones y acciones

que abogan por un acceso más amplio a internet, enlazando a los ciudadanos de todo el mundo y apoyando una nueva generación de creadores culturales, consumidores y participantes.

### Actividades

Para alcanzar sus objetivos, Culture.mondo realizó un mapeo internacional de los portales culturales a través de una encuesta por internet que dio como resultado el contexto para el desarrollo de la red, estableció la agenda para la mesa redonda de portales culturales y generó información para esta publicación.

Al convocar la participación en la encuesta y en la red, Culture.mondo ha optado por una definición abierta y flexible de portal cultural, la cual incluye portales culturales nacionales, portales temáticos y observatorios culturales. Con mayor frecuencia se trata de portales nacionales; sin embargo, algunos son regionales (dentro o a través de fronteras nacionales) o supranacionales.

La encuesta ha mostrado que el número de portales se incrementa a un ritmo explosivo y que, colectivamente, estos llegan a una audiencia global de millones. Ha subrayado la importancia de los portales culturales para asegurar el acceso, dar cauce a la diversidad y promover la participación ciudadana en la cultura.

Los temas y las discusiones que se presentan en esta publicación se centran frecuentemente en los visitantes a los portales, los viajeros en internet que cruzan la entrada del portal cultural y, al hacerlo, son invitados a una comunidad global cultural –que intersecta y conecta su propia cultura con culturas alrededor del mundo.

Culture.mondo fue diseñador y fue facilitador de la Mesa Redonda de Portales Culturales titulada Los portales culturales: nuevos

desafíos y buenas prácticas, que se llevó a cabo en la Expo 2005 de Japón (6 a 8 de junio de 2005). Las discusiones se enfocaron en aspectos clave de manejo que actualmente enfrentan los arquitectos de los portales: socios, administración, manejo de contenidos, mercadotecnia y necesidades de las audiencias.

Dieciocho portales culturales (de todas las regiones del mundo) y la UNESCO participaron en la Mesa Redonda de Culture.mundo. Estos portales reflejaron una diversidad en su naturaleza, nivel de desarrollo, campo de acción y presentaron una mezcla de portales públicos, privados, mixtos, nacionales, regionales e internacionales. Como resultado de esta reunión, los miembros activos de la red crecieron más del doble, con conexiones en todas las regiones del mundo.

Culture.mundo ha establecido una presencia en el ciberespacio con su página [www.culturemondo.org](http://www.culturemondo.org) en la cual los miembros de la red se mantienen al tanto de actividades, recursos disponibles y ligas a más de 80 portales culturales que facilitan el acceso a un amplio espectro de información cultural.

## Planes a futuro

La comunidad de Culture.mundo se propone incrementar la participación de portales culturales y cuerpos estratégicos de todo el mundo. El conocimiento compartido entre ellos permitirá asegurar que los portales establecidos puedan compartir mejores prácticas y apoyar el desarrollo de nuevos portales alrededor del mundo. Sin embargo, la información fluye en muchas direcciones: los nuevos enfoques de portales emergentes, la tenacidad de los portales que cuentan con menores recursos y el ingenio de los arquitectos de portales jóvenes que constantemente proveerán de nuevos puntos de vista y perspectivas sobre los retos de crecimiento y desarrollo de los portales.

Conforme crezca y se expanda, Culture.mundo



se compromete a mantener una organización abierta y flexible que responda a los intereses y aspiraciones de sus portales miembro. Culture.mundo no propone una burocracia multinacional o un portal de cara al público como destino masivo. Culture.mundo no está atado a ninguna agenda nacional o a un enfoque exclusivo en ningún aspecto de diseño y manejo de portales.

La red está en espera de intercambiar información y colaborar con otras iniciativas relacionadas, tanto regionales como multinacionales, incluyendo MICHAEL, la Organización de Estados Americanos (OEA), la Red de Observatorios de Políticas Culturales y la UNESCO.

La red planea buscar socios a fin de llevar a cabo más investigación y compartir información para apoyar el intercambio de conocimiento entre portales. Esta iniciativa beneficiará tanto a los desarrolladores de portales como los ciudadanos individuales en todo el mundo a que entren a esta nueva comunidad virtual a través del portal cultural que elijan.

# SOMMAIRE EXÉCUTIF



## Objectifs

Les objectifs des portails culturels du réseau Culture.mondo et de la présente publication sont inter reliés.

Bien que les portails culturels soient aussi diversifiés que les pays ou groupes culturels qui les ont créés, leur réalisation est motivée par un objectif commun : faire participer et informer les citoyens tout en les encourageant à explorer leur identité, leur culture et leur créativité.

À partir d'une poignée de portails créés au milieu des années 1990, le domaine s'est étendu à des centaines de sites. Plus de 300 portails culturels ont été répertoriés et invités à prendre part à un sondage en ligne complété au début de 2005. Plusieurs autres portails culturels sont également en développement. Culture.mondo est né de l'intersection et du chevauchement des intérêts de différents portails culturels. Ce réseau informel international et émergent des portails cherche à encourager et à faire progresser la communication entre les architectes, créateurs, gestionnaires, promoteurs et bailleurs de fonds. Il vise aussi à transposer ce dialogue à l'arène internationale.

Culture.mondo cherche à favoriser le développement d'une communauté globale des portails culturels publics en ligne en tant que véhicule de :

- Connexion internationale;
- Partage des connaissances;
- Collaboration; et
- Diffusion des pratiques exemplaires.

Cette publication, Les portails culturels : Passerelles vers une communauté globale, soutient l'objectif de Culture.mondo en ce qui a trait au partage des connaissances se rapportant aux portails culturels. Elle cherche également à décrire le développement et le travail de Culture.mondo tout en tentant de situer les portails culturels qui le composent au sein d'un plus vaste système de

conversation virtuelle globale. Les groupes de travail internationaux comme Culture.mondo stimulent les discussions et actions qui défendent un accès élargi à Internet, et rejoignent les citoyens du monde entier afin de soutenir la génération de futurs créateurs, consommateurs et participants.

## Actions

Afin de satisfaire ses objectifs, Culture.mondo a entrepris de cartographier le domaine international des portails culturels en effectuant un sondage en ligne. Celui-ci a fourni le contexte nécessaire à l'élaboration du réseau et à la définition d'un ordre du jour pour une première table ronde internationale des portails culturels, en plus de servir comme point de départ à la présente publication.

En sollicitant la participation au sondage et au réseau, Culture.mondo a opté pour une définition souple et ouverte de ce qu'est un portail culturel, qui comprend les portails culturels nationaux, les portails thématiques et les observatoires culturels. Les portails sont pour la plupart nationaux. Par contre, certains sont régionaux (à l'intérieur ou dépassant les frontières nationales) ou supranationaux.

Le sondage a démontré que le nombre de portails augmente à un rythme phénoménal et que, collectivement, ils rejoignent un auditoire global de plusieurs millions de personnes. L'efficacité des portails culturels à promouvoir, auprès des citoyens, l'accès, la diversité et la participation à leur culture, a certainement été sous-estimée.

Les questions et les discussions présentées dans cette publication sont souvent centrées sur les visiteurs des portails, ces internautes qui franchissent le seuil du portail culturel et qui, ce faisant, participent à une communauté culturelle globale, où s'entrecourent leur propre culture et celles du monde entier.

Dans le cadre de l'Expo 2005 au Japon Culture.

mondo a organisé et animé, du 6 au 8 juin 2005, une table ronde internationale des portails culturels intitulée « Portails culturels : Nouveaux défis et pratiques exemplaires ». Les discussions ont porté sur les principaux enjeux de gestion auxquels font présentement face les responsables de ces portails : partenariats, gouvernance, gestion des contenus et besoins de la commercialisation comme des publics.

Dix-huit portails culturels (provenant de tous les coins du monde) et l'UNESCO ont pris part à la table ronde de Culture.mondo. Les portails participants représentaient une vaste gamme diversifiée par leur nature, leur stade de développement et leur portée, tout en présentant un mélange de portails culturels privés, publics, collaboratifs, nationaux, régionaux et internationaux. À la suite de cette rencontre, les effectifs du réseau ont plus que doublé par la suite pour s'étendre à tous les confins du globe.

Culture.mondo a établi sa présence sur le Web au [www.culturemondo.org](http://www.culturemondo.org), où les membres du réseau sont informés des activités et trouvent des ressources utiles, ainsi que des liens vers plus de 80 portails culturels qui facilitent l'accès à une panoplie de renseignements culturels.

## Plans d'avenir

La communauté de pratique de Culture.mondo vise à inciter la participation des portails culturels et des organismes stratégiques du monde entier. L'échange de connaissances permettra aux portails bien établis de partager leurs pratiques exemplaires entre eux et de soutenir le développement de nouveaux portails de par le monde. Cependant, l'information circule dans de multiples directions. L'apport tout frais des portails émergents, la ténacité des portails moins bien pourvus et l'ingéniosité des jeunes architectes de portails fourniront un apport incessant de nouveaux points de vue et de nouvelles perspectives sur les défis liés à la croissance et au développement des portails.



Tout en poursuivant son développement, Culture.mondo s'engage à conserver une organisation à structure ouverte, légère et souple, capable de s'ajuster aux intérêts et aux attentes des portails membres. Culture.mondo ne propose pas une bureaucratie multinationale ou une immense destination publique. Culture.mondo n'est relié à aucun intérêt national, ni à aucune approche particulière de la conception et de la gestion des portails.

Le réseau attend avec impatience d'échanger et de collaborer avec d'autres initiatives connexes, régionalement comme internationalement, dont MICHAEL (inventaire multilingue du patrimoine culturel européen), l'Organisation des États américains (OAS), le Réseau des observatoires de politique culturelle et l'UNESCO.

Le réseau prévoit rechercher des partenaires afin d'entreprendre des recherches et de partager plus de renseignements dans le but de soutenir l'échange de connaissances entre les portails culturels. Cette initiative profitera à la fois aux constructeurs de portails et aux citoyens du monde entier, qui accèdent à ces communes globales par l'entremise de leurs portails culturels favoris.



## INTRODUCTION

“The ability for ordinary people to discover other cultures is perhaps the most important feature of our times. Through the direct experience of other cultures, individual citizens come to a better understanding of their own culture.”

**Hervé Fischer** • Président/fondateur • FIAM Canada  
*Fédération internationale des associations de multimédia*  
*International Federation of Multimedia Associations*

Public cultural portals are digital doorways to cultural collections, assets and activities. Although they are as diverse as the countries or cultural groups that build them, their creation is motivated by a common desire: to encourage citizens to explore their identity, culture and creativity. The Internet has facilitated the gathering and organization of information, either by the individual user, or by intersecting portal interests, so that via each portal the Internet traveller steps into a flourishing global commons of cultural experience.

From a handful of such portals established in the mid 1990s, the field has exploded by the hundreds. Over 300 portals were identified and invited to participate in an online survey that was completed in early 2005. Many more cultural portals could be added to the mapping or are under development.<sup>1</sup> Cultural portal architects are most often public sector or non-profit organizations with significant public funding and support. The rapid expansion of the field reflects the growth in the Internet itself, but it also speaks to an understanding of the power of the Internet to engage and deliver meaningful content. Heralding a shift in how basic public policy objectives are delivered, it is essential to better track and understand this worldwide movement.

It is worth noting that some portals are not new, so much as a reorientation of earlier, more established online initiatives. Examples of this include websites emanating from ministries of culture, or other national cultural information systems. This reorientation reflects the desire to adapt to changing audiences, as well as to Internet user needs and interests.

Cultural portals have arisen in response to specific sectoral or national interests. Like the Internet, however, their development is affected by individual users, by the constant waves and changes in the wider digital world and through connections with international counterparts.

Culture.mondo is the result of the intersecting and overlapping interests of a few cultural portals that are mindful of the movement that is afoot. It is an emerging, informal network that encourages and facilitates communication among those responsible for creating, developing, and maintaining public cultural portals, worldwide. International working groups such as Culture.mondo advance the discussions and actions that argue for broad access to the Internet, thereby embracing citizens worldwide and supporting a next generation of cultural creators, consumers and participants.

<sup>1</sup> The longest established portals that responded to the survey (launched in 1995-96) are [lankskafferiet.skolutveckling.se](http://lankskafferiet.skolutveckling.se) (Länkskafferiet (The Link Larder), Sweden is a pedagogical site for Swedish pupils, especially 10–15 year-olds); [Swissart.net](http://Swissart.net) (Contemporary artists in Switzerland); [Museum.ru](http://Museum.ru) (Russian museums); [ilam.org](http://ilam.org) (Los Museos y Parques de América Latina); [obs.coe.net](http://obs.coe.net) (European Audiovisual Observatory); and [scran.ac.uk](http://scran.ac.uk) (a learning image service, Scotland).

# INFORMATION GATHERING AND NETWORK KNITTING

## Culture.mondo

Culture.mondo was conceived in June 2004 at the European Union Minerva International Digitization Conference in Dublin, Ireland, where a number of cultural portal authorities began discussing common challenges and sharing best practices. An International Steering Committee came together in Brighton in December 2004 and comprises Culture.ca (Canada), Kultur.nu (Sweden), Cultuurnet.be (Belgium), 24hourmuseum.org.uk (UK), Collectionsaustralia.net (Australia) and Culture.fr (France). Subsequent to the meeting of the International Roundtable of National Cultural Portals in June 2005, the steering committee was expanded to include Culture.tw (portal in development, Taiwan) and eultura.gob.mx (Mexico).

The Culture.mondo goal is to facilitate the development of an online community of public cultural portals, as a vehicle for them to:

- Connect internationally;
- Share knowledge;
- Collaborate; and
- Disseminate best practices.

The Culture.mondo network has opted for an open and flexible definition of cultural portal — one that includes national cultural portals, thematic portals and cultural observatories.

These can be defined as follows:

- National cultural portal: seeks to present and/or aggregate diverse multidisciplinary cultural activity within a country, including such elements as organizations, events, cultural information and editorial content.
- Thematic portal: provides regional, national or multinational information for specific disciplines or cultural sectors, such as museums or music.
- Cultural observatory: a cultural research and/or policy development collective that may produce a Web portal that presents information and research within a region, country or group of countries and in some instances provides a digital working environment for a network of researchers.<sup>1</sup>



The majority of cultural portals are national, in the sense that their content relates to activity within and across the country of origin. Thematic portals and cultural observatories are no exception — notwithstanding the specific parameters within which they gather content, they are frequently national in scope. Some portals studied are regional, within or across national borders, or supranational.

In December 2004, Culture.ca (Canada) agreed to be the initial host of the Culture.mondo secretariat and offered to host an inaugural Roundtable in 2005. In the spirit of distributed responsibility and shared resources, it was proposed that the secretariat rotate to another member portal in June 2006. Steering Committee members have contributed leadership and knowledge, technical and network support, and human and financial resources to the development of the network and its initiatives, including the launch of an online information centre and shared Internet space, [www.culturemondo.org](http://www.culturemondo.org). The Steering Committee functions in an ad hoc manner and expects to formalize its structure when there is increased participation by a wide range of cultural portals. Portals vary substantially in size and in the human and financial resources available to them. It is the goal of Culture.mondo to seek out and support participation from all corners of the globe and from countries with portals of every scale, at every stage of development.

### International Steering Committee, Brighton 2004

#### Back row:

Jane Finnis  
Dries Coppens  
Hans Nissens  
Ana Durán

#### Front row:

Vladimir Skok  
Kelli Fraser

<sup>1</sup> According to Augustin Girard, former Head of the Département des Études et de la Prospective of the French Ministry of Culture and Communications, "An Observatory is a place of negotiation, of interactivity. It does not deliver judgements."

## International Survey of Cultural Portals

In recognition of the dramatic increase in the number of national, regional and supranational cultural portals, the first undertaking of the Culture.mondo steering committee was the creation of an international on-line survey. The survey, concluded in March 2005, was undertaken by Decima Research Inc., with funding from Culture.ca and Cultuurnet.be. The overall objective of the survey was to provide a basis for understanding this emerging phenomenon from a portal management and cultural policy perspective.

This preliminary survey sought to:

- Map readily apparent cultural portals worldwide;
- Gather basic management and policy-based information on the state of cultural portal development around the world;
- Compare situations and discover common challenges;
- Identify trends in cultural portal development;
- Highlight examples of good practice;
- Inform other portals about the Culture.mondo concept;
- Set the stage for the future development of the Culture.mondo network.

Working with Decima Research, the International Steering Committee identified and invited participation from 370 portal organizations; of these, 80 organizations completed at least half of the survey and were included in the statistical analysis.<sup>1</sup> These 80 cultural portals are now linked on the Culture.mondo website, providing the visitor access to a unique window on cultural information and resources from around the world.

Within the limits of time, resources and references, every attempt was made to reach a representative sample of world regions and types of portals. However, the survey is neither comprehensive nor exhaustive. Given the absence of literature (including studies and directories of existing portals) which might have guided this first survey, Culture.mondo recognizes the need for additional work to cover all regions of the world and further investigate particular aspects of portal management.

The survey results pointed to significant gaps in information, particularly in areas related to visitor statistics and portal financing. These gaps, and the difficulty of reaching agreement on what to include, underscore the need for further targeted research.

Portals were asked to self-identify as one of the following: a national cultural portal (31%); a specialized thematic portal (i.e. dance, music, theatre, museums —51%); an observatory on cultural policy (18%). Not surprisingly, the survey revealed the existence of portals built at levels other than national, but that served a national, supranational or international interest; this indicates the broader geographic and contextual reality within which some portals operate. Most of the portals surveyed are either non-profit, with a high percentage of government funding (46%), or government-run (27%). Very few of the portals within the survey sample are profit-making or business-oriented (3%). These factors alone indicate that the portals face similar challenges. They also underscore the reality that it is extremely difficult to make a solid private-sector business case for the development and operation of cultural portals. It is the public domain in which they rest most comfortably.

<sup>1</sup> The summary overview prepared by Decima and an analysis of the survey responses are available for download on [www.culturemondo.org](http://www.culturemondo.org).

## International Roundtable, Cultural Portals: New Challenges and Good Practices.

The Culture.mondo International Steering Committee designed and facilitated an international roundtable of cultural portals entitled "Cultural Portals: New Challenges and Good Practices."<sup>1</sup> hosted by the Canada Pavilion at Expo 2005 (Japan). The results of the survey provided the point of departure for the discussions. Targeted roundtables addressed four significant areas of concern: partnerships, governance, content management, and marketing and audience needs — topics that had been identified by the International Steering Committee and survey respondents as key management issues currently faced by portal architects.

Eighteen cultural portals (from all regions of the world) and UNESCO participated in

*UNESCO views favourably any steps taken to strengthen and extend links between national cultural portal authorities around the world. The Organization heartily welcomes the holding of such a Roundtable as this, and hence I am pleased to grant UNESCO's sponsorship to the event.*

**Koïchiro Matsuura** • Director-General •  
United Nations Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization • Paris, May 27, 2005

the Culture.mondo Roundtable.<sup>2</sup> They were diverse in nature, stage of development and scope and represented a mix of public, private, collaborative, national, regional and international cultural portals.

The Roundtable initiative was intensely collaborative, underlining a core aspect of cultural portals around the world. The two days of discussion and networking established the framework for a community of national portals committed to shared knowledge, increased participation, distributed responsibility and international collaboration. As a result of the Roundtable, the membership of the steering committee expanded to include



**Culture.mondo  
Roundtable  
Expo 2005,  
Aichi, Japan**

portal architects from Taiwan and Mexico. The network also agreed to continue annual face-to-face meetings and committed to ongoing exchange and collaboration via the online community of practice digital hub on [Culturescope.ca](http://Culturescope.ca).



<sup>1</sup> The two-day event, June 6–8, was part of a think tank and symposium held at the Expo 2005 Canada Pavilion in Aichi, Japan entitled "Cultural New Media Days," jointly organized by the Department of Canadian Heritage e-Services Branch, the Canadian Heritage Information Network (CHIN) and Canadian Culture Online (CCOL).

<sup>2</sup> A list of participants is included in the Appendix.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF CULTURAL PORTALS: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

On one hand, the survey of cultural portals and its analysis reinforced the knowledge and experiences of the survey organizers; on the other, it unearthed unexpected details and raised questions and challenges — all of which encouraged the Culture.mondo International Steering Committee to continue pursuing their shared goals of increased public engagement, network building and knowledge exchange.

### Objectives of Portal Architects: Why Build?

In the constantly expanding virtual agora that is the Internet, what motivates cultural portal builders — be they non-profit, government agents, or individuals on a mission — to hang out their digital wares and open their doors for business? The public sector builder - or sponsor, in the case of non-profit portals - is driven by a range of policy imperatives: general or online service-delivery strategies, or more specific policy considerations in the areas of culture, tourism or education.

*Tourism is vital to the Moroccan economy. The decision to create culture.ma – a quality cultural portal for Morocco – is driven by the need to provide visitors with authoritative and credible information that will foster and build tourism.*

Said Ennahid • culture.ma (in development)

Not surprisingly, those who conceive of these cultural portals want to stand out. They want to be the one-stop shop — the best, or even the only credible source of cultural information within their country, their stratum of the cultural sector, or their particular arts

discipline. Their primary interest in providing timely, credible and valuable information to their citizens, members and site visitors shapes the structure of the portal, no matter how small; it affects governance and guides the growth and evolution of portals, regardless of their stage of development.

The increased appetite for information and services on the Internet has made it impossible for the public, private and non-profit sectors to ignore staking a claim for digital real estate. For some elements of the population this is now the only way to reach them. Portal builders have often come to the Internet via a side door — they are government ministries or agencies already mandated to serve their citizens through a variety of channels, and the Internet is one of these. Alternatively, they are facilities or organizations seeking to use the power of the Internet as a marketing tool to expand and reach new audiences. While it may have begun as an adjunct to other means of engagement and dissemination, the Web portal now stands as a tool unto itself — one that requires a specialized approach to its management, marketing and maturation.

Thematic portals and cultural observatories, often developed by service organizations or networks and member-driven, fully recognize the benefits and power of aggregation that enable effective connection with a broad audience. Even the smallest and poorest member organization is ensured a presence, thanks to the collective weight of the group.

Having accepted the undeniably compelling reasons for building their portals, the architects are striving for more. They want to reach larger, more diverse audiences, to be universally accessible and to increase meaningful engagement with individuals.

They are, however, financially challenged. Some are teetering between conflicting, or waning, stakeholder (and funder) interests. All require and seek partners and collaborators to move their portal forward.



While most portals of this nature are a relatively recent phenomenon, some have been in business since the early days of the Internet. The goals, aspirations, barriers and challenges faced by portal builders are similar, regardless of the stage of development of the portal. In fact, given the speed at which the technology is advancing, its relative accessibility and the rate of penetration of the Internet, many newcomers find themselves at the same level of development as their older counterparts. Knowledge-sharing is rich and rewarding when the conversation, by its very nature, includes the young and the emerging alongside the seasoned.

### Audience for Public Cultural Portals: For whom are they building?

While there is certainly cross-over in their primary audiences, there is a specific pattern within each of the three portal groups: for all cultural observatories, the primary audience is made up of “cultural experts, professionals and policy makers.” This particular group, almost exclusively, identifies their reach as international; they clearly have a strong interest in sharing and comparing research and data. Of the national cultural portals, 80% identified their audience as “the general public—local residents;” they had a surprisingly low interest in the “visit planners/tourists” market. <sup>1</sup> Thematic portals noted an even lesser interest in the tourist market. <sup>2</sup> And they ranked “local general public” (44%) lower than “cultural experts or professionals” (76%) or “local cultural enthusiasts” (50%).

With respect to audience needs, development and marketing, one must recognize and understand these differences, as different tools, approaches and partnerships are required to reach specific users. “Broadening reach,” “getting more users” and “increasing traffic” were often included in the three-year objectives of both the national cultural portals and the thematic portals. In order to share

best practices, it is important for the portals to recognize who they are trying to reach and then to consider how best to achieve and measure success.

It is instructive to consider who identifies the “target” audience. How often, if at all, does the portal builder — or any website for that matter — review and consider whether they are, in fact, reaching their target audience? Are the assumed and actual audiences mutually exclusive, or mutually beneficial? Once a structure or a service moves from the “real” world into the digital realm, does the audience change and, if so, how ready is the site builder to adapt and adjust? And what of “accidental audiences” — users that happen on the site for reasons the builder had not considered? How can these unexpected participants become a new focus and a new way of considering public engagement?

Most of these cultural portals see themselves as just that — multiple doorways or signposts to more specific information and services sought by the user. They perform a delicate balancing act, acting to ensure the user is effectively directed off the cultural portal, while encouraging them to investigate and discover the breadth of information offered on the portal itself. This “stickiness dilemma” continues to challenge portal builders, especially when considering measures of success. Do visitors frequent the site once, or many times? Do they stay on for less than a minute, or browse for several minutes? How long are they meant to stick?



Hans Nissens, cultuurweb.be, presents the new site to Bert Aniaux, Flemish Minister for Culture, Youth, Sport and Brussels Affairs

<sup>1</sup> only 41% of national cultural portals indicated tourists as a primary market.  
<sup>2</sup> only 33% saw tourists as a primary audience.

## Content Provided by Cultural Portals: What is offered to the audience?

The particular angle taken by cultural portals depends on their starting point. The content may relate to a single discipline (contemporary music, Russian museums, etc.) within a country (or across a few countries) or, more broadly, to an entire country (arts and culture across the many regions and time zones of Canada). Within these parameters, portals strive to be inclusive, comprehensive and representative. Within the cultural portal group, culture is broadly and loosely defined, shaped by the portal builders and their visitors.

There was an open-ended question in the survey that asked the portals to identify their unique position, or offering. A very high number (in all three categories) addressed the values of authenticity, reliability, timeliness, credibility and completeness with respect to the content they provide. The goals of complete access, one-stop entry and interoperability were commonly noted, both by established portals and those under development, or in the early years of operation.

Most cultural portals present a combination of centralized and decentralized content; very few of them rely only on decentralized content and about 30% use experienced writers (this rises to 50% in national cultural portals over three years old). Content issues are different in the cultural observatories which, for the most part, do not generate the content, but rely on submissions from their research networks, all of which are made up of experienced professionals. However, observatories exercise significant editorial oversight and an interest in providing complementary content on their site for members — opinion pieces, analysis, newsletters, etc.

In keeping with their goal of ensuring comprehensive content, the multidisciplinary national cultural portals surveyed cover a

wide range of disciplines. The discipline-specific thematic portals reveal a deep layering of information. Success in achieving this density depends on resources. As in offline publishing, the provision of reliable, timely and wide-ranging information relies on a network of writers and correspondents — an infrastructure that is not present in many portals. The ability to provide content that is unavailable elsewhere — either by virtue of its specificity, its thoroughness, or its uniqueness — is a preoccupation of most portals.



Mexico: e-cultura

An overview of the content and service-provision areas of the survey reveals that 60% of the thematic portals and the national

cultural portals incorporate events calendars into their sites. Of these same portals, 50% present features and specialized editorial content (in the national cultural portal group alone, this rises to 65%). Approximately one third have incorporated sound and/or video and only a handful (5%) offer online ticketing services. While the portals have expressed an interest in interactivity in their three-year objectives, less than 30% currently include blogs, forums, working-group space, voting or other participatory tools. To some degree, this can be attributed to cost. Given the high interest, however, this relatively low percentage reflects the challenges governments in particular face in providing user-driven spaces within their portals.

Content is generally time-sensitive, although less so in the case of the observatories group. Another key element in the unique positioning of the portals is the value of timely and frequently updated content, the provision of which requires dedicated staff. In the case of national cultural portals, none reported less than weekly updating; fully 48% update

daily. Thematic portals are more variable; as a group, their scale of operation covers a wider range, so more of them have difficulty updating on a regular basis. 48% update daily, 28% weekly and 24% monthly or less. Cultural observatories update much less frequently. Only 17% update daily, 41% weekly and 42% monthly or less.

## “Hell is managing other people’s content.”

**Michel Blondeau** • CEO/Idea Guy  
e-centricarts.com, Toronto. *Canada*

Content is the *raison d’être* of all cultural portals. As the content and number of contributors grow, managing the content becomes a question of resources and juggling priorities. As described by Michel Blondeau, cultural portal needs are different from those of many other portals. There are few culturally sensitive developers and there is limited experience with user-centric design and delivery. Cultural content management tools and solutions are not readily available or affordable.<sup>1</sup>

## Structure and Governance of Portals

While a few portals have good-sized, full-time staff, many more operate with a combination of small staff, out-sourcing, distributed management, shared accountability and volunteer committees. The portals studied exhibit a significant range in scale, from one-person volunteer initiatives to full-time teams of more than 20, with wide networks of contributing correspondents. If we consider a “small organization” to include one to three staff members, 48% fall into this category in the national portals group; by this same definition, 73% of thematic portals and 81% of cultural observatories are “small.” The

combination of a small staff and volunteers presents challenges in achieving consistency and long-term development. Some portals operate as a “cell” within government, with seconded staff, or they are an arm of government, or of a larger national organization. While this provides strong infrastructure support and some assurances of quality, it also presents challenges in the area of governance and in harmonizing government priorities with audience needs. Portals that are a development or offshoot of earlier offline or online initiatives, (public or other), often start with a built-in organizational and governance structure, which may or may not be appropriate to the new online enterprise.

When portals depend on partners that are located across a country, or layered (at municipal, regional or national levels) within a region, management and governance over distance present a unique set of challenges. While diversity is an asset, the ability to achieve consistency and quality — both critical indicators of success — implies significant human and financial resources. It often necessitates training on the part of the lead or central hub in the portal network.

In order to ensure content is sustainable, credible, comprehensive and avoids duplication, portals seek to develop and secure partnerships in all aspects of their work, with a range of private, non-profit and public sector collaborators. The considerations surrounding partnerships, services and governance are inextricably linked; portals must carefully plan how they will integrate new partners into portal development and what the implications are for portal management and governance.



<sup>1</sup> Michel Blondeau presented content management options and strategies to the International Roundtable participants.

# PORTALS AND CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT



## Participation

Many of the national portals indicated that they are striving to be “the best,” “the most comprehensive,” “the most complete,” or “the first point of access” for the citizens of their country. They want their content to be inclusive and to represent the breadth of activity in their country, including regional and rural participation. They want to ensure the broadest participation possible by content partners and they value partnership with cultural organizations. Public awareness of their portals is a primary objective.

Portals have indicated significant interest in developing more interactive components for their sites. They want to engage their users more, to invite increased participation and feedback. Currently, only 26% of the government-led portals incorporate interactive features (weblogs, voting, forums, etc). This relatively low level of interactivity reflects the challenge they face in providing an open and unvetted digital space. The technology is readily available and generally affordable, as evidenced by its use in many non-government sites and its adoption by sites at very early stages of their development. Interactivity is a key priority of many recently established (within the last three years) non-profit portals functioning outside of government. However, the goal of fostering citizen engagement through wide-open 24/7 access remains problematic for government-run sites.

Public policy mandates compel cultural portals to become “real connectors” of people to resources. User-centred, citizen-centred, network-based, partnership-oriented are terms frequently used by portal architects. The potential for the Internet to provide a point of entry to dialogue that can feed directly into policy development has not gone unnoticed. For this to be a credible vehicle for the citizen and a valuable tool for policy makers, portals must ensure that the platform they provide gives voice to citizens and ensures they will be heard without misrepresentation.

## Diversity

All of the national portals have an interest in promoting their country’s cultural wealth — first to their own citizens (their primary audience) and also internationally. Diversity and inclusiveness are key drivers, as evidenced both through the responses to the open-ended question: “What are your three-year goals?” and the responses that consistently assign priority to local audiences within the target audiences identified.

Multidisciplinary portals define culture broadly; in general, it is not limited to “the arts.” Each portal reflects the individual character of the country itself, its understanding of culture and user-directed needs.

Sites, particularly those built on decentralized content provision and management have also found ways to incorporate the full scope of activities, from major organizations through to local, community-level participation. Often this is realized through partnerships that allow comprehensive local and regional information to be included in the national portal.



## Access

The core business of these public portals is connecting with their citizens and the Internet is becoming an ever more accessible means of achieving this. The commitment to access is expressed in government strategies such as the Canadian Culture Online Strategy, in which the key elements of access and visibility are the underpinning of the Culture.ca gateway. Short and longer-term objectives identify usability and interoperability as a means to ensure the broadest access possible.

*The government's role is not to decide what "culture" is, but to provide a platform for it.*

Alvaro Illanes Garcés • Cibernetica.cl (Chile)

Portals such as llam.org<sup>1</sup>, based in Costa Rica, and eultura.gob.mx from Mexico connect many smaller websites and portals in a single national or multinational entry point to provide access by as broad an audience as possible to the widest range of cultural activity possible. Collaborations such as these, that bring together organizations and initiatives at different stages of development, with varying resource bases, present both challenges and opportunities. Not all partners arrive at a project with the same level of understanding or knowledge. Some are rich in resources, others are resource poor. Training becomes a key element of the collaboration.

In response to the open-ended questions in the online survey, many portals reported that they include in their three-year goals efforts to reach specific users, such as youth, children and schools. The survey indicated that government-led portals have a significant interest in broadening their reach to include school students. Because of the relatively sophisticated nature of their content,

thematic portals and observatories adopt a more targeted approach to college and university students.

Access goes beyond simply bridging the digital divide through considered technology choices; it includes careful attention to language, design and content. Successful

connections between portals and the range of audiences they serve are those that make the cultural content accessible in a language the audience understands. An example of this is the 24 Hour Museum's "Show Me" feature that reaches out to children in their own language.

The concept of access has taken on a much expanded meaning with the Internet. Access is certainly not limited to the citizens of individual countries; in making the decision to establish a national cultural portal, the portal builder is ensuring that the culture in question is shared around the world. It is an outward-looking exercise, rather than one aimed at protecting or preserving in a narrow sense.

The public portals either have, or aspire to, broad stakeholder interest. Steering committees, advisory groups and cross-program committees are identified as a means to ensure representation and meaningful connection to, a range of groups. Managing this complex interconnection of stakeholders is not an easy or straightforward task; it is an imperative that sets public portals apart from those with more commercial interests.

Portals cite the value of representative, consultative and collaborative committees and advisory groups in ensuring balanced content selection and access.



1 los Museos y Parques de América Latina

# CULTURAL PORTAL MANAGEMENT

The following is not a comprehensive overview of every management issue faced by cultural portals; rather, it identifies some of the management aspects that are unique to portal management. It addresses issues specific to working in an online environment and in the intersecting space between the online and offline worlds. Primarily, it reflects the main challenges reported through the survey and the Roundtable deliberations at Expo 2005, Japan — areas in which effective networking and sharing of best practices can be most useful.

## Collaborative Approaches: networks, cross-sectoral collaborations and public-private partnerships

Regardless of size, cultural portals pursue partners and collaborators for a host of reasons: to ensure that they meet their objectives, to underscore their authenticity and often just to keep the door open. Portals seek out and work with content partners, editorial partners, technical partners, strategic partners, marketing partners and financial partners. In what has been described as “a new era of cooperation”<sup>1</sup>, portals have forged partnerships with and across government, with businesses, other portals and information providers, cultural and non-cultural organizations of all sizes.

The range and diversity of networks spans multinational initiatives, such as the European Union portal, MICHAEL<sup>2</sup>, to grassroots partnerships between users and creators, such as cult.bg in Bulgaria, with myriad diverse and individual situations in between.

MICHAEL currently comprises the UK, Italy and France and has set out to provide interoperable electronic access to aggregated multilingual cultural information. Cult.bg places “user content providers and citizens at the centre,” having realized early on that its most significant partners are its users.

Cross-ministerial partnerships within government can maximize portal effectiveness. In addition to developing partnerships with ministries of culture, national cultural portals are working with ministries of education, tourism, science and industry. While the cultural sector is well aware of the impact that culture has on education, tourism and entertainment, this impact is not always recognized by the other sectors. Identifying shared audiences can help to make the case for collaboration. Portal authorities that have successfully broken down barriers and galvanized cross-departmental interest early on in the development of their portal have dramatically enhanced the effectiveness and reach of the portal.



1 Philippe Avenier, culture.fr  
2 MICHAEL: Multilingual Inventory of Cultural Heritage in Europe <http://www.michael-culture.org>. MICHAEL is a development from MINERVA, a European Commission initiative, established in the late 1990s, that sought to investigate, coordinate and support policy development with respect to digitization.

*Cultnat.org has been propelled by cross-ministerial interests that include culture, tourism, libraries and education. The partners may have differing agendas, but ultimately their interest is ensuring that we build our cultural content into an excellent Website and make it available to the widest audience possible.*

Reem Bahgat • Cultnat.org, Egypt

Additional layers of partners have surfaced from the portals themselves as new networks have emerged. There is keen interest in partnering between Culture. mondo participants in areas of content and technology sharing, information gathering and possible exchange of expertise. MICHAEL is currently in negotiation with the eTEN for funding for a new phase of the project, MICHAEL Plus. This will extend the project to eight new countries by 2006 (Finland, Malta, Greece, Hungary, Poland, Czech Republic, the Netherlands and Germany). The MICHAEL consortium hopes that the project will extend to include all EU countries in the near future. While to date there has been limited private sector involvement in the development of national cultural portals, portal builders are increasingly forging innovative partnerships between the private, public and non-profit sectors. Technical issues, particularly in the developmental stage, are often handled through outsourcing; such arrangements have been cited as successful business partnerships and exchanges of services. Partnerships with other publications, print and electronic media and alternate distribution vehicles facilitate the movement of content in and out of the Web.

The variety of partnerships and the imperatives that drive these collaborations impact significantly on

the management and governance of portals. Successful partnerships require a high level of commitment and buy-in from all collaborators; long-term, effective contribution only results when all partners perceive value, have a strong sense of ownership in the portal and recognize their shared and intersecting audiences.

The portal authority must be able to manage expectations effectively, support partners as they arrive at a common understanding and level of expertise, and ensure cooperation around shared goals. These goals must remain front and centre during planning, implementation and evaluation.





*The week Cult.bg went live, we were shocked by how few visitors we had — something was very wrong. Our site, which had all kinds of “official credibility,” and our audience were not connecting. In short, we completely revamped our approach; we moved from a centralized editorial position to encouraging reader contribution and put the ownership of Cult.bg firmly in the hands of young creators and users — pretty soon visitor traffic shot up and it keeps on growing.*

**Galia Dimitrova** • Cult.bg, Bulgaria



## Ownership and Governance

While there is a decided commonality of purpose in national cultural portals — celebrating culture and reaching a broad audience — each portal faces a very different structural and governance challenge. The size and scope of the portals range from small volunteer-led initiatives to substantial organizations with complex management structures and a confirmed resource base. As mentioned earlier, many have strong ties to government and some are 100% public. Limited commercial opportunity has meant that this is an arena that does not attract significant private sector interest — except when cultural interests intersect with other interests, such as entertainment and tourism.

Governance questions can be distilled to “Who leads?” and “Who pays?” Since most of the portals have strong ties to government, the question can be further articulated as: What drives public portal development — cultural or other policy agendas, or audience interests and needs?

Many of the large, costly, national projects have originated with government, who contend with strong policy interests with respect to public access, representation and diversity. The government presence, and the degree to which portals are understood as “official” government sites, affects their governance. Ownership at an official, national level certainly has its benefits, not least is the availability of resources and, for some users, credibility to the information provided. But can government-led sites grow unfettered? Can they move nimbly through the expanding information galaxy and technological changes of the Internet? Sites that are independent of government, but driven by similar policy considerations, can often experiment more freely with emerging tools. They can more readily try new ways of interacting with audiences. Savvy public sector leaders look to them as a testing ground for their own engagement with the public.

Long-term viability can, of course, be secured through consistent financing. Long-term relevance is harder to purchase. When the ownership of the site more directly involves the user, this relevance is perhaps more assured. This is the case for many non-profit structures, cultural or other, that rely on the unflagging efforts of volunteers to mitigate their lack of resources. Such portals actively engage volunteer committees, advisory groups and specialist panels to maintain a meaningful connection with their users and stakeholders.



Partnerships and collaborations discussed earlier also affect governance structures and decisions. In order to keep their audience engaged, portals must be dynamic and evolving; their governance approach should evolve in tandem with the growth and change within the organization — perhaps from public to private or non-profit, as appropriate.

What is clear is that governance arrangements vary. As cultural portals evolve, their long-term success will lie in their ability to adapt and shift as necessary, keeping in mind the ownership interests of their site. Flexibility, responsiveness and “light-touch governance” are required, both in establishing public portals and maintaining their connection and relevance to audiences.

**Role of governments: rationalizing policy and investment with audience needs**

In response to the International Survey of Cultural Portals, the three-year objectives most frequently cited by the government-run portals were as follows:

- To be the best, or the most comprehensive, source of information for the public and policy makers;

- To raise public awareness and increase the number of visitors;
- To encourage and develop partnerships in content provision, management and financial areas;
- To broaden access regionally and to schools;
- To provide new services and interactivity.



The key priorities of citizen access and participation are certainly evident in these objectives. Providing authentic, diverse and timely content requires a significant investment that some governments are willing to provide. It is logical for governments to be in the business of establishing cultural portals on a national scale. However, can a government portal successfully respond to government priorities and ministerial objectives and serve audience needs at the

*Culture.fr grew out of the official website of the French Ministry of Culture. This afforded us a solid resource base and the invaluable wealth of experience built over years of national cultural Web presence. We are now more autonomous and distanced from any official point of view: it has a more relaxed feel and a freer sense of expression.*

Philippe Avenier • culture.fr

same time? Do these goals conflict? Does the conflict create identity problems? Partnerships, collaborative arrangements, advisory committees and decentralized content development within government portals such as those of Mexico and France have helped to balance the realities of government ownership.

The immediacy of the Internet and the tools available for instantaneous interaction with the digital visitor certainly make it possible to maintain a constant and dynamic dialogue with audiences. Interactivity and user involvement is an area of growing interest for both established and new sites. However, it is challenging for government-run sites to adopt and fully utilize these features — sometimes for purely technical reasons and other times because their very openness challenges cautious editorial policies.

Governments are in a position to fund these initiatives well and facilitate their successful incubation. By putting the initiative at arms length from government and through continued meaningful connection to the audience, government can enable an appropriate and responsive governance structure to develop organically. In so doing, it can ensure quality service provision to the user and facilitate a governance structure that is more responsive to the audience profile, interest and needs.

Unfortunately, portals that have been developed with government funding, because of a specific public policy agenda, face incredible challenges when these policies shift and funding is withdrawn.

### User-focused audience development

In one particular respect, the cultural portal is no different from any other cultural undertaking or organization. The “build it and they will come” philosophy does not work

for the cultural portal, just as it doesn’t work for a theatre, a gallery, a festival or even the greatest show on earth.

Developing audiences is a primary concern of all Roundtable participants and certainly of the survey respondents. However, most have very few resources to dedicate to marketing and some are constrained by their governance structure in the scope of marketing that can be undertaken. Those portals that have grown out of offline engagements with audiences (museums, for example) note that the online world is very different and many pre-conceived notions about marketing must be left at the gateway to the digital world.

*“We are mistaken in thinking that successful offline marketing tools and techniques can just be tweaked for the online world, that our online visitors are the same as our real-world visitors – not so. We must look more closely at our online users – really get to know them and then develop user-focused strategies specifically for them. We cannot simply recast traditional offline approaches.”*

**Kevin Sumption** •  
Collections Australia Network

Portals understand the need for effective online and offline marketing of their sites. However, marketing alone does not ensure audience growth, regardless of the amount of resources brought to bear. The key first step to successful marketing is to know and understand the audience: Who are the users? Why do they visit the portal? How do they use the information they gain from the portal? A user-focussed approach is critical, along with an understanding that it is not possible to be all things to all people.

The Cultural Portal Survey asked respondents to identify their “primary audience.” A question has been raised as to how accurately they have identified the audiences for their sites — whether they are real or perceived. Learning more about the online audience directly would certainly clarify the matter. “Accidental audiences,” or users, can arrive from unexpected quarters. Awareness of these audiences not only assists the portal builder in marketing, but also in considering changes to the product.

Many participants have undertaken some level of audience survey, from elaborate studies to more simple pop-ups, seeking to discover age, location, interests, and so on of their users. Regular audience and user involvement is important for designing, curating and editing content to keep sites fresh and relevant. The Culture.mondo network have committed to sharing their tools (online surveys, etc.) and research outcomes with a view to better understanding and comparing audiences.

Audience information and user profiles can also assist portal builders in attracting appropriate advertisers, should the portal have enough regular traffic and elect to pursue advertising to generate revenue for the site.

Based on the survey responses, the percentage of budget that portals devote to marketing is generally quite low. An average of 7.5% has been dedicated to marketing by national cultural portals, 4% by thematic portals and

“In the overcrowded Internet world, promotion, positioning and marketing of the cultural portal is required to deliver on the access and visibility objectives that shaped it.”

Mostafa Zommo • Director General e-Services, Department of Canadian Heritage

approximately 2.5% by cultural observatories. Given that many portals identify broadening audiences and users as an objective, but few have the resources or ability to do so, it will be valuable to share innovative, low-cost marketing approaches and experiences.

Online marketing is used significantly by all groups of portals (87% of national cultural portals, 83% of thematic portals and 75% of cultural observatories). The most prevalent online initiatives are the inclusion of logos and links and the exchange of information with other cultural organizations — over 50% in all groups used these methods. Fully 60% of the survey respondents in the national cultural portals use online banners, compared with 19% in the thematic portals and 25% of the observatories (observatories also include their banners on non-cultural sites).



Australia: Collections Australian Network (CAN)

Most of the paid marketing indicated by all three groups was directed at print material — fliers, posters and direct marketing — in an effort to target specific user groups. All undertook some newspaper advertising and some did television advertising — the latter, however, was done almost exclusively through exchange of services.

In the national cultural portals group 30% undertake regular marketing surveys and 72% have done at least one survey. In thematic portals the figures are lower: 13% do regular surveys and 37% have done some. Cultural observatories report that membership and user satisfaction are more frequently used measures. The nature of their work is such that they have more direct contact with a smaller, more easily identified and closely connected user base.

Information will be shared immediately within the Culture.mondo network and will benefit both the more established portals and those under development. Tips for low-cost marketing and ways to harness online technologies to speed traffic directly to a portal are vital to their health and survival. Recent reports suggest that over 80% of users rely on search engines as the first port of call for information. This reinforces the importance of optimizing content and improving visibility on search engines.

RSS<sup>1</sup> and other push technologies are the future of the Web; cultural portals need to understand their potential and cost effectiveness. RSS is well established in the publishing industry as a standard. Broadcasters such as the BBC have hundreds of RSS feeds, but cultural-sector publishing is slow on the uptake.

The 24 Hour Museum launched the first cultural RSS news feed in the UK in 2003. Since then, the site's traffic has more than doubled each year and over 70% of people arrive at a page other than the homepage due to the site's "google-friendliness."



UK: 24HM newsfeed viewed on partner website

## Measures of Success

The other important consideration with respect to marketing is the issue of measures of success. What are reasonable and valuable tracking and assessment criteria and how can these performance indicators be compared and assist in the sharing of best practices? Moreover, in the case of publicly funded portals, what evidence can be mined to support the significant public funding that is invested in these online initiatives?

Knowing more about the audience allows for better evaluation: Who is the audience, why do they come and how do they use the information? Sharing audience profiles across the Culture.mondo network can assist in building an information base from which to consider measures of success.

"Success" in the online world is most often measured by quantifiable results that count visitors, page views or time spent on the site. However, it is not possible to know from a numbers analysis alone the degree to which the portal has been successful on its own terms, its percentage of market share and so on. The user-centred approach to marketing and development discussed earlier keeps the focus on the audience and on connection to the public, a perspective that must also be reflected in performance indicators and evaluation.

<sup>1</sup> Really Simple Syndication (RSS) To find out more visit: [www.24hourmuseum.org.uk/etc/formuseums/TXT31577\\_gfx\\_en.html](http://www.24hourmuseum.org.uk/etc/formuseums/TXT31577_gfx_en.html)

“By pushing our content into the heart of search engines we’ve upped our visitor numbers and got our cost per user down from 49p to 5p in four years. We look at this alongside other less quantitative stuff like numbers of downloads and email enquires. We also monitor our relationship with the sector we represent, how many times do people update their museum entry or send us a press release — altogether this paints a pretty good picture of impact and reach.”

Jane Finnis Director • 24 Hour Museum, UK

Portal architects can be consumed by performance indicators — numbers and statistics that can impress and dismay critics and supporters alike. While there is a certain value in numbers and quantifiable results, these numbers are most useful when presented in the context of how one’s site compares to others. International context is instructive and can be extremely useful in conversations with stakeholders, contributors and investors.

A clearer and more detailed picture of the world of public cultural portals, drawn through meaningful performance indicators, will make it easier to compare and contrast them to the commercial online world — a study that would be worth undertaking.

In partnership with other strategic initiatives at the national and international levels, Culture.mondo is interested in developing clear guidelines and using common tracking tools that will assist in measuring outcomes to objectives and will also build a resource of comparative international data that can resonate on a national level.



In addition to considering the numbers of visitors and related statistics, it is important to find ways to assess the quality of the online experience and the value of the information provided. The right questions must be asked in order to measure success against the portal’s goals. Frequent and meaningful dialogue with users both informs the assessment process and connects the user more fully with the portal’s direction.

## WWW: FORWARD SLASH/FUTURE

Culture.mondo sees a healthy future in its network. From a small core steering committee, the network has expanded to a committed group of more than 20 portals (and growing). The more than 80 portals that participated in the survey are already available to visit on the Culturemondo.org site. This international network of portals is committed to continue working together and have chosen to use the interactive hub of the Canadian Cultural Observatory, Culturescope.ca, as a virtual work and meeting place.

To complement and deepen the exchange and engagement afforded by this online working space, the network is planning a second face-to-face Roundtable in 2006 —establishing a pattern for annual meetings to be hosted by member portals from around the world.



Participants at the Culture.mondo Roundtable Expo 2005, Aichi, Japan

The Culture.mondo community of practice aims to increase participation from a wide range of cultural portals and strategic bodies worldwide. Knowledge exchanged across portals will ensure that established portals can share best practices with each other and support the development of new portals around the world. However, information flows in many directions — the fresh take of emerging portals, the tenacity of less-resourced portals and the ingenuity of young portal architects will constantly provide new

views and perspectives on the challenges of portal growth and development. The network recognizes the potential of active content partnerships and the opportunity to create and present new material that crosses national boundaries and reaches out to and connects with audiences in the global arena.

As it expands and grows, Culture.mondo is committed to maintaining an open, nimble and flexible organization that is responsive to the interests and aspirations of its portal members. Culture.mondo does not propose a multinational bureaucracy or a massive public-facing destination website. Culture.mondo is not tied to any one national agenda, or to a specific approach to portal design and management.

The network looks forward to regional and multinational exchange and collaboration with other related initiatives, including MICHAEL, the InterAmerican Network of Cultural Policy Observatories of the Organisation of American States (OAS), the InterAmerican Network of Cultural Policy Observatories and UNESCO in the post-Cultural Diversity Convention world now that it has been adopted by the General Conference.

The network plans to seek out funding partners in order to undertake further research and information-sharing to support the exchange of knowledge between portals, for the benefit of the portal builders and the individual citizens worldwide that enter into this new global commons through the national cultural portal gateways.

Culture.mondo sees the potential for cultural portals to be at the vanguard of new online tools and technology and to champion innovative participatory experiences and citizen engagement. As information and knowledge becomes even less tethered to a particular place or space, as information is mobilized, cultural travellers will be able to experience their culture and the culture of others through multiple means of access.

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# APPENDIX: CULTUREMONDO ROUNDTABLE PARTICIPANTS

## [www.virtualmuseum.ca](http://www.virtualmuseum.ca)

The Virtual Museum of Canada celebrates the stories and treasures that have come to define Canada over the centuries. The VMC harnesses the power of the Internet to bring Canada's rich and diverse heritage into our homes, schools and places of work.

**Contact:** namir\_anani@pch.gc.ca



## [www.culture.fr](http://www.culture.fr)

Culture.fr is produced by France's Ministry of Culture and Communications in cooperation with numerous partners. It is available to the largest possible audience, offers a cultural agenda, a selection of sites, information on thousands of cultural organizations as well as articles covering all aspects of cultural life.

**Contact:** martin.rogard@culture.gouv.fr



## [www.cultnat.org](http://www.cultnat.org)

In three languages, www.cultnat.org presents projects in Egyptian cultural and natural heritage documentation, namely archaeological, architectural, natural, folklore, music, photographic, manuscripts, and so forth. It also includes a publications list, press releases, news, feedback, and FAQs. The uniqueness of the Web site lies in the wide range yet specialized content that it presents.

**Contact:** rbahgat@mcit.gov.eg



## [www.ecultura.gob.mx](http://www.ecultura.gob.mx)

E-cultura offers a panorama of on-line Mexican culture through its newsletter service, daily news section, children's section, billboard covering more than 80 institutions, a bookshop, and a museum shop. It includes data from festivals, museums, artists and groups, archaeological sites, arts education programs, and links to cultural Web sites throughout the world.

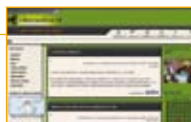
**Contact:** Acastel@correo.conaculta.gob.mx



## [www.cibernetica.cl](http://www.cibernetica.cl)

This free multi-portal Web site is administered by a group of young people who understand the relevance of technology, education, and culture. With global content pertaining to the information society, cibernetica.cl promotes universal access to the Internet, telecommuting, knowledge networks, the creation of digital inheritance, and promotion of emerging arts.

**Contact:** editor@b2.cl



## [www.cult.bg](http://www.cult.bg)

Cult.bg is a portal and cultural server presenting contemporary art and culture in Bulgaria. Due to its open structure, it has managed to involve most of the cultural institutions, art organizations, and artists in Bulgaria. It provides free services to help artists and organizations, such as Web hosting, email accounts, mailing lists etc.

**Contact:** redactor@i-space.org



## [www.visitingarts.org.uk](http://www.visitingarts.org.uk)

Visiting Arts seeks to strengthen and enrich international awareness and understanding in the UK through the arts and cultural exchange. Its country Cultural Profiles comprise extensive overviews and detailed directory listings of every cultural sector (arts, media, and heritage) within a specific country, created to encourage and facilitate reciprocal international cultural exchange.

**Contact:** visitingarts@fpt.vn



## [www.culture.ca](http://www.culture.ca)

Culture.ca is an initiative of the Department of Canadian Heritage in collaboration with partners from the private and public sectors. It is a public space and knowledge platform where visitors from around the world can access dynamic information on the diversity and vitality of cultural life in Canada through a comprehensive set of cultural resources.

**Contact:** Guy-marc\_dumais@pch.gc.ca



## [www.kultur.nu](http://www.kultur.nu)

Culturenet Sweden has built a large systematically organised catalogue of links to all sorts of Swedish culture; artists, musicians, writers, actors, theatre groups, dancers, libraries, archives, museums, galleries, book stores, governmental agencies concerned with cultural matters, organisations, research, education etc. The services also includes "What happens?", an online event calendar.

**Contact:** Ana.duran@swipnet.se



## [www.24hourmuseum.org.uk](http://www.24hourmuseum.org.uk)

The 24 Hour Museum is the UK's national virtual museum. It publishes daily arts/museum news, exhibition reviews and in-depth trails. It promotes non-profit UK museums, galleries, and heritage attractions and seeks to engage audiences with culture. It is one of the most successful cultural Web sites in the UK attracting more than 500,000 visitors each month.

**Contact:** jane@24hourmuseum.org.uk



<http://ocpa.irmo.hr/>

Ocpa.irmo.hr is presently the only regional Web resource centre and clearing house for collecting, maintaining, analyzing, updating, and disseminating information on cultural development in and for the African continent, and for serving as a knowledge-based policy analysis mechanism. It stimulates information, research, training, and cooperation relating to cultural policies in Africa.

**Contact:** Mbuyamba\_lupwishi@yahoo.fr



[www.asef.org](http://www.asef.org)

In response to the demands of cultural policy makers and practitioners, ASEF proposed a process entitled "Cultural Partnership Mapping" aimed at creating an Asia-Europe portal facilitating exchanges between regions. The proposed bi-regional, multidisciplinary portal serves as an interface for governments and artists including a virtual space for cultural collaboration.

**Contact:** anjeli@asef.org



[www.collectionsaustralia.net](http://www.collectionsaustralia.net)

This year AMOL was relaunched as Collections Australia Network (CAN). CAN works with archives and libraries across Australia to make their collections accessible, promoting exhibitions and education programs. Through CAN, teachers, students, and cultural tourists can access object records, images, as well as a specialist primary and secondary school education resource gateway.

**Contact:** kevin@pnh.gov.au



**NEW ZEALAND** (*in development*)

The portal will provide access to New Zealand cultural information held by both government and non-government cultural agencies and organizations. The portal will be an events-based Web site with information on cultural goods, services, events, and products to diverse audiences both nationally and internationally.

**Contact:** Mary.Donn@mch.govt.nz

[www.culture.tw](http://www.culture.tw) (*in development*)

Culture.tw is a collaborative effort between the Council for Cultural Affairs and National Digital Archives Program (NDAP) of Taiwan. The cultural portal under development would hold the digital content of the cultural, biological, ethnic, and geographical diversity of Taiwan. It's inspired by NDAP's prior experience in cross-disciplinary collaboration between content experts and information technologists.

**Contact:** ilya@iis.sinica.edu.tw

[www.ilam.org](http://www.ilam.org)

www.ilam.org facilitates Latin American museums to become "links" between cultures. It contains a directory of museums and parks in Latin America, a newsletter, educational offers, links to on-line exhibitions, thematic categories of sites, documentation centre, a forum, and general links. ILAM organizes museological workshops and runs a virtual volunteers program.

**Contact:** christina@ilam.org



[www.cultuurweb.be](http://www.cultuurweb.be)

The Flemish culture site makes it easy for the general public to find the right information quickly with a calendar module, search module, electronic newsletter and link database... Visitors can create a personal profiles and can rate or give opinion about cultural activities. Information about reservations, prices and ticketing is available on cultuurweb.be.

**Contact:** hans.nissens@cultuurnet.be



[www.portal.unesco.org/digiarts](http://www.portal.unesco.org/digiarts)

The UNESCO DigiArts Portal disseminates historical, theoretical, artistic, technical, and scientific research in the field of electronic and digital arts. It promotes information exchange among artists, scientists, and technicians from different geo-cultural regions. It supports and encourages the use of electronic software for electronic communication and creation.

**Contact:** b.kaldun@unesco.org



[www.culturescope.ca](http://www.culturescope.ca)

This cultural observatory connects to the issues affecting Canada's cultural vitality to stimulate discussion and policy development. Its resources include specialized data and statistics, digitized papers, news, and events. Culturescope Groups provide a venue for password-protected exchange and discussions between cultural professionals on projects and new developments.

**Contact:** Vladimir\_skok@pch.gc.ca



[www.culture.ma](http://www.culture.ma) (*in development*)

Although it is still in the idea stage, progress is being made on culture.ma, a cultural gateway for Morocco. The project will be conducted with the assistance of the following key players: Al Akhawayn University in Ifrane ([www.aui.ma](http://www.aui.ma)), the Moroccan Ministry of Culture ([www.minculture.gov.ma](http://www.minculture.gov.ma)), the Moroccan ministry of tourism ([www.artesnet.gov.ma](http://www.artesnet.gov.ma)), and the L'Office national Marocain du tourisme ([www.tourisme-marocain.com](http://www.tourisme-marocain.com)).

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