ANALYSIS: Women Immigrants in Montreal and Internet

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An analysis of the Pilot-Survey conducted in March-April 2000
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Internet is a wonderful communication technology that allows people to connect with the farthest places in the world for just fractions of a second. Yet, does a woman-immigrant in Quebec need it? Is it going to improve the quality of her life? Are her needs for information and patterns of communication compatible with the offered Internet services?

Questions along the above lines have not been studied systematically yet. The statistical data available on the web site of the Québec Ministère des Relations avec les Citoyens et de l'immigrations **1** though, accentuates the importance of the issue. For the last five years (between 1995 - 1999), 140,366 new immigrants have arrived to the province. Seventy five percent of them (105,295 people) have settled in Montreal. Assuming that the demographic characteristics of this group are identical with those of the larger (provincial) group of immigrants, we can conclude that the number of women over 15-year-of-age is around 36,000, or more than one third of the group.

The thousands of women that are coming each year to Montreal from all over the world enter a society, whose economy is undergoing a profound restructuring. In the knowledge-based economy, not only the computer skills are absolutely essential, but most of the information on government services, job markets, shopping, banking, or entertainment is already provided online.

If the women-immigrants are to be integrated faster into society, they need to learn a new language, which, itself, takes several years, to overcome the cultural shock, to cope with the initial decline of the family's income, which is the general case for the newcomers' families, and, subsequently, to find job. Internet can help them with all this, because to have access to more information, to be aware of the options and opportunities you have, is the way to succeed.

How do the women-immigrants, themselves, perceive the benefits of the Internet? Is the Internet already part of their lives, and, if not, why? What are the barriers that prevent women from being more intimate with the computer and the Internet?

Notes:
1   See: http://www.mrci.gouv.qc.ca
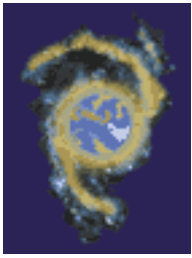
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Targeting the above questions, in March 2000, a pilot-survey was undertaken among the women-immigrants studying French language courses at Centre d'orientation et Francopnonie des Immigrants (COFI). It was assumed that this was one of the few places in Montreal where the recent women-immigrants were constituted as a group, due to the common studying activity that neutralizes the other socio-demographic differences.

Along with the research purposes of the survey, there was a practical goal stemming from Studio XX's intention to establish stronger connections with the local women's communities by organizing Internet training courses for underprivileged women. The information gathered by the survey and presented bellow is instrumental for the teaching process and the materials, especially for women coming from different cultures and with varying educational experiences.

One hundred copies of a predominantly multiple-choice questionnaire in French were provided for distribution to a senior officer at COFI. Through seventeen substantial and thirteen demographic questions, an attempt was made to interrogate:

- the level of adoption of the Internet in this social group,
- the patterns of utilization and functions that were privileged by the immigrant-women,
- and the women's preference to a particular design of an Internet course.

In regard with the expected linguistic difficulties that the students would have, it was suggested that the questioner be introduced into the classes by the teachers, and even be used as a teaching device, if it would be considered appropriate.

More than a month later, the liaison person was able to provide us with 29 filled out copies of the questionnaire. While not representative, the rate of the returned copies is satisfactory, when the following factors are considered:

- the survey introduced, arguably, a unfamiliar issue to most of the women in this group,
- the researcher did not have an immediate contact with the respondents and was not able to stimulate their participation,
- in general, the group is characterized by a linguistic deficiency in understanding, and, moreover, answering some of the free format questions.
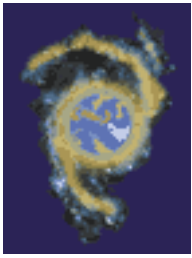
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Who were the respondents and who were not represented?

Women of five age groups - from 25 to 60 year-old, are represented in the sample, although the younger women, between 25 and 35 year-old, predominate (65,51%). A half of the women are married (58.62%). Almost all of the respondents do not have a paid job (93.10%), but only less than a half declared that they were looking for a position (44.82%).

It is significant that 75.86% of the women have a very high level of education: university diploma, yet, this fact, itself, confirms the impression that the respondents represent only that fraction of the women-immigrants population, which is in a more advantageous position to learn how to use the Internet and for what purposes.

The next demographic indicator helps to explain the above "anomaly": among the respondents are eight young women, whose native country is France (one could ask what their function in COFI is - are they students, teachers, or volunteers?), and eight women from Eastern Europe and China, which are, traditionally, countries of origin of highly educated immigrants.

Geographically, the respondents represent four continents - Europe (44.82%), South America (24.13%), Africa (20.68%), and Asia (10,34%). **2**

Another odd result is that a half of the respondents have been in Montreal for less than two months (48.27% - the French women are among those that arrived in the year 2000), and eight more came in the last year (27,58%). These are not the typical cases of women enrolled in the COFI's French courses. **3**

The most striking data were received when women were asked what their families' annual income was. Thirteen women decline to answer this question, while one third of the rest declared that they live on income which is less than $15.000 per year (31.03%). If the reason not to answer this particular question was that the women felt uncomfortable to acknowledge publicly the low income level of their families, then we can interpret the combined data ("no answer" plus "bellow $15.000") as suggesting that most of the women-immigrants' families live in virtual poverty (75.86%).

Notes:

2   The statistical data demonstrates that, in fact, between 1993 and 1997, most of the immigrants entering Quebec came from Asia (42.7%), while only 25.3% of them came from Europe. (See: Le Quebec en movement. Statistics sur l'immigration. Edition 1998. Gouvernement du Quebec. MRCI)

3   The survey was based on the assumption that the respondents would be women that have been immigrants in Canada for more than two and less than five years. After the second or third year of the enrollment in a French course, one, usually, acquires enough proficiency in the language, in order to participate in a survey. On the other hand, the chance to become a Canadian citizen is greater after the fourth or fifth year of the permanent residence in the country.
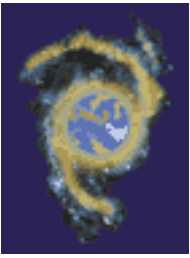
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Who were the women that remained silent?

By considering the dominant profile of the respondents (women in their 20s and 30s, university graduates, from Europe, possessing knowledge in French above the intermediate level (86,20%), we can suggest who the "silent majority" of women-immigrants were and why they declined our invitation to fill out the questionnaire. It could be assumed that women with a less-than-a-college level of education were not used to the task of filling a survey questionnaire and did not know much about the Internet. The major barrier for them to decline this rare opportunity to voice their opinions and concerns, while only in their first five years in Canada, most probably was linguistic. It is significant that 58.62% of the respondents claim an advanced level of using French, and, in addition, 27.58 % have intermediate level.

How is the Internet perceived by the women-immigrants?

Ten questions from the substantial part of the questionnaire aimed to investigate the Internet level of penetration among women-immigrants in Montreal. Not surprisingly (considering the above demographic data), 57.14% of the respondent do have access to the Internet and 62.5% of them, respectively, have it at home. There are not many "heavy users" among them (one respondent uses the Internet for 34 hrs/week, and another one for 21 hrs/week), but there are women that spend 10 hrs/week (25%) or 7 hrs/wee (18.75%) in front of a computer in average. For 37.5% of the respondents, Internet occupies less then three hours per week.

Before arriving to Canada, most of the respondents had been aware of the existence of the Internet (75.86%), but 42.85% of them still do not have access to the medium. When asked "why", many of them acknowledged that they don't know how to use it (66.66%), while, for a half of them, buying a computer and a modem is unaffordable. The other two major reasons point directly to the living standard of these women:

- for 33.33% of them, it is not clear what purposes to use the Internet for (it is conceivable that when one's family lives with less than $15.000 per year, there is not much room for e-shopping, e-mailing, or doing research on the net); and,
- for a quarter of them, paying the monthly user fee is not affordable, either.
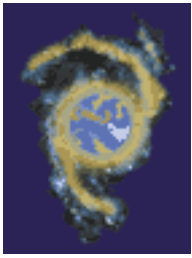
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With this background, it's understandable why 57.72% of the respondents perceive a public library as the best public place to use the Internet, followed by a school or university library (34.48%) and a community center (27.58%). The free access to the Internet that many public libraries offer to their readers is a well-known and appreciated alternative to get on the Net. In addition, women (and, moreover, the immigrants) could have a preference to a safe, quiet and well supervised public area, where they could obtain professional help and instructions for free. It is interesting that only 10.34% of the respondents would prefer their ethnic community's center as a public place to get access to the Internet.

The survey aimed to compare how the women-immigrants with and without access to the medium perceive the Internet. Answering identical question and choosing from an identical set of options, the two groups exhibited some differences. First, the present users of the Internet consider it mainly as a communication tool for e-mail sending (93.75%) and searching for interesting information (100%), while for the potential users the e-mail communication is less important (respectively, 69.23%) than surfing for information (100%). Second, all of the potential users consider job searching on the net as a primary function of the medium, while it is so only for 81.25% of the present users. Third, the present users are less convinced that the Internet is a communication tool for participation in public life (12.5%) than the potential users are (41.66%, respectively), which could be interpreted as a "realistic" vs. "romantic" view of the medium, where the latter is influenced by the mass media.

Answering the same question, both groups of respondents demonstrated that shopping or banking on-line and entertaining are not very popular uses of the Internet yet.

Among the popular uses of the Internet, there is one, which is especially important to these women: job search. It is highly significant that, while 75.86% of the respondents have supplied an answer to the broader question "what do you know about the Internet uses and benefits", only for 22.72% of them the "job search" option is a priority. The possible interpretation of this fact is that, despite the claim of familiarity with the new medium, most of the women have a rather limited understanding of the advantages, which the Internet provides to people in their situation: well educated, but in a process of adaptation to a new socio-political and cultural realities. In fact, for the majority of the respondents (82.75%) the mass media are the main source of information about the Internet, while 58.33% of them have been instructed how to use it by a family member or friends.
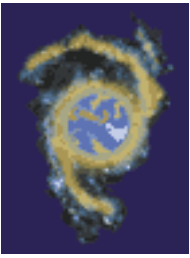
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How do the women-immigrants prefer to learn to master the Internet?

The women were asked whether they would be willing to take an Internet course, if such opportunity would arise. The affirmative answer was overwhelming: 93.10% of them. The only one negative answer was, in fact, a positive one, for the respondent preferred a university Master program, than a course!

The respondents' preferences were equally divided between the three possible course designs: once, twice, or three times per week. Nevertheless, 44.82% would prefer a morning-time three-hour course to an afternoon-time (24.13%) or evening-time course (20.68%).

For a significant part of the responding group, an Internet course would be more attractive if they could bring their child/children with them (41.37%), depending, of course, on the time when the course is offered.

Despite our expectations, the (hypothetical) instructor's gender does not influence the women's determination to take an Internet course (this is true for, at least, 58,62% of the respondents). A female instructor gains a small preference over a male instructor in the rest of the group (24.13% vs. 17.24%). In fact, the preference can be interpreted as culturally determined, for a female instructor is desired by the respondents that have come from Algeria, Morocco and France, while the women from China, Mexico, Russia and Guatemala voted for a male instructor.

In addition, French is wanted as the instruction language by 82.75% of the respondents.

The last question, concerning the design of an Internet course, intended to detect the significance that the financial factor has for the motivation to join such a course. For 41.37% of the women, the reasonable price for a course of three hours is $5. The rest of the group was equally divided between a price of $10 and $15, respectively.
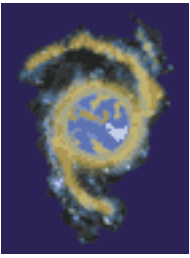
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What are the major conclusions that can be drawn from the survey?

Although constrained to a particular demographic subgroup of the Montreal women-immigrants population (as it was discussed above), the Pilot Survey was able to provide data on these women's attitudes to the Internet, the medium's level of accessibility and penetration among them, and preferred use-patterns. In this sense, the Survey has a highly suggestive and informative value. More precisely, it found that:

- The Internet is already present in the women-immigrants' life: they possess certain understanding of its uses and benefits, and many women use it for communicative, educational or general information-searching purposes;

- Unfortunately, almost half of them do not use the Internet for two main reasons: deficiency of skills and knowledge (they don't know how the Internet could be useful to them), and because they cannot afford to buy the necessary equipment, to pay the monthly user fee, or to attend a three-hour course for more than $5. Hopefully, the women-immigrants' families in Montreal will benefit from the financial support for renting or buying computer hardware, and for paying the Internet user fee, that is provided by the provincial government under the project "Brancher les Familles sur Internet", launched at the beginning of May.

- Although the unemployment rate among the women-immigrants is very high, there is an unsatisfactory level of both awareness of the Internet potential to provide information on job opportunities and skills to use the medium for this purpose.

- In conclusion, in the survey, the women-immigrants have expressed strong desire and motivation to learn how to search the Web. Studio XX, consistent with its local women community oriented activities, hopes to provide workshops specifically designed for this social group, where flexible timing, child-care, and friendly atmosphere will be guaranteed.