

# Beavers, Maple Leaves and Maple Trees

## *A Study of National Symbols on Localised and Domestic Websites*

### Abstract

Because a national symbol appeals to the sense of collective identity shared by the members of a nation, its use in localised websites by companies from outside the nation merits reflection. In this paper, a case study of thirty of the largest American corporations is used to explore how common it is for national symbols to be incorporated into websites localised for Canadian users. The results are then compared to the use of national symbols on the websites of thirty of the largest Canadian corporations to determine whether national symbols are adopted more frequently by domestic or international companies. The paper ends with some reflections on the inclusion of national symbols within a localised website and the ambiguity of their meaning.

### Keywords

*localisation, collective identity, symbolism, national identity, website translation, adaptation, national symbols*

### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Given that the purpose of localisation is to ensure that localised products are adapted to the conventions of a given locale (Lommel 2003, p.5), a successfully localised website should not immediately strike targeted users as being different from a site designed by a domestic company. As part of the process of adapting the site for a new locale, especially when targeting an entire country, localisers may decide to incorporate images of locale-specific national symbols such as flags or monuments. Singh and Pereira (2005), for instance, recommend including symbols and "pictures of national identity" such as those that emphasise architectural achievements or national pride on websites designed for collectivist locales (2005, p.83). They stress that domestic companies will be incorporating such symbols in their own websites and advertisements, implying that international companies will be at a disadvantage if they do not follow suit.

Yet this assumption may merit further reflection. This paper will raise questions about the use of national symbols on websites and explore the issues surrounding the inclusion of national symbols within localised sites. It will do this by first exploring what national symbols are supposed to represent and then studying examples of Canadian symbols used in localised and domestic websites.

## 1. National Symbols

National symbols help form and maintain national identity, mark a nation's collective memory, preserve its shared past

and represent the power of a state to define a nation (Geisler 2005, pp.xv–xvi). In a way, national symbols act much like the logo of a corporation, as they are a means by which the State can depict an image of itself to members and outsiders alike. Much like a corporate logo, national symbols represent a nation's key values and are chosen because they have special significance for the nation and its members. As Smith (1991, p.77) notes, national symbols, customs and ceremonies make the concepts of a nation visible for all members and appeal to their emotions.

However, what exactly constitutes a national symbol is not unanimously agreed upon. Smith (1991, *ibid.*), for instance, groups symbols, customs and ceremonies together and considers flags, anthems, parades, coins, capital cities, folk costumes, folklore museums, war monuments, passports and borders to be "obvious" examples. Cerulo (1995, p.13) adds mottos and shrines to this main list, and Smith later expands his initial examples with a series of "hidden" ones, including popular heroes or heroines, fairy tales, educational practices and military codes. He asserts that these symbols, customs and ceremonies are the ways of acting shared by a "community of historical culture" (1991, p.77). Geisler, on the other hand, argues that Smith's typology may be too broad. He suggests that a narrow typology of important national symbols would minimally include the flag, anthem, national holidays, currency, capital and major national monuments, with the flag being the most important and the others ranked somewhere below it (2005, pp.xxi – xxii).

These symbols, Geisler asserts, serve to support and

<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank Clara Foz for her feedback on an earlier version of this paper.

reinforce a nation's identity, both within its borders and to the outside world. Each time such a symbol is "actualised" – whenever an anthem is sung or a flag is raised, for instance – it reminds members of the nation that they share a common past and are bound by a collective identity. In fact, only through constant repetition of a symbol in the media, political speeches, public ceremonies, etc., do members of a nation become attached to it (Geisler 2005, pp. xix, xxvii). Similarly, David Bell (2001, p.95, following Anderson 1983) suggests that nations are imagined communities and that symbols are essential for this community to become a nation, since members can interact with others only through shared 'things' such as an anthem or flag and a set of customs and rituals.<sup>2</sup>

Because national symbols depict a nation's history, values and identity, they send an ambiguous message to users when they are incorporated into a localised website. On one hand, the symbols act as a sort of logo that identifies the site as the Canadian version. A Canadian flag beside a "change location" link may simply serve to distinguish this site from one that has, say, a French, Japanese, or Chilean flag, alerting users that they are indeed browsing the site designed for their locale. The ambiguity results from the fact that the "imagined community" described by Bell and Anderson is also projected by localised websites incorporating local symbols. Just as a logo stamped on a product's packaging signals to consumers that the product has been made by and comes from a given company, so do national symbols signal that a website has been made in and is part of a given nation. Users may therefore interpret a national symbol to mean that both the company and the user belong to the same imagined community, share the same collective identity, and are bound by the same common past.

## 2. Use of Canadian Symbols

The Government of Canada officially recognises three national symbols in addition to the national flag, colours, seal, and anthem: the beaver, maple tree and maple leaf (Government of Canada, Canadian Heritage 2004). All of these symbols are infused with special historical significance. The beaver, which became "a symbol of the sovereignty of Canada" when the *National Symbol of Canada Act* was passed in 1975, is a reminder of the importance of the fur trade to the early Canadian economy in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, when thousands of Canadian beaver pelts were shipped to Europe annually for use in fur hats. It appears on the Canadian five-cent coin and was featured on the first Canadian stamp. The maple tree, officially recognised as Canada's "arboreal emblem" in 1996, has "played a meaningful role in the historical development of Canada and continue[s] to be of

commercial, environmental and aesthetic importance to all Canadians" (*ibid*). At least one of the ten species of maple native to Canada grows in every province, and the sap is used to make maple syrup, of which Canada is the leading global producer.<sup>3</sup> Finally, the maple leaf (Figure 1), incorporated into the Canadian and Ontario flags in 1965, appears on the one-cent coin and is featured in *The Maple Leaf Forever*, a song composed for Canada's confederation in 1867 and an unofficial English-Canadian anthem for several decades.

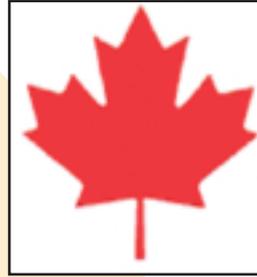


Figure 1: The 11-point maple leaf, an official symbol of Canada

Though these symbols may be accorded official State-recognised status, several others could be considered to have semi-official status, even if one follows only the narrow typology of symbols offered by Geisler (2005). One could reasonably include the moose, found on the twenty-five cent piece; the loon, depicted on the one-dollar coin; the polar bear, which appears on the two-dollar coin; and the Bluenose, a fishing schooner built in the 1920s that was renowned for winning several international races during the 1920s<sup>4</sup>, represented Canada at the 1933 Chicago World Fair, was sent to England on behalf of Canada in 1935 for the Silver Jubilee of King George and Queen Mary, and is featured on the ten-cent coin (Province of Nova Scotia, Department of Tourism, Culture & Heritage 2004). And since Geisler also includes major national monuments, one might add to this semi-official list the Canadian Parliament buildings or the War Memorial in Ottawa, where Remembrance Day ceremonies are held each year.

Other regions of Canada have their own provincial or 'national'<sup>5</sup> symbols as well. All of the country's ten provinces and three territories have an official coat of arms, flag and flower and many regional groups, such as Franco-Ontarians, also have officially recognised flags or emblems. While such symbols could also be used by localisers to target a website to a specific group of Canadians, this paper will focus only on national symbols representative of Canada as a whole rather than a particular region. A future study will encompass a wider range of symbols, as their use on a website will help indicate which particular segments of the Canadian population a company may be trying to target. For the purposes of this case study, both the official and non-official symbols mentioned in the two preceding paragraphs were considered to be national symbols of Canada.

<sup>2</sup> See also Hall (1996) for further discussion of imagined communities and cultural representation.

<sup>3</sup> Canada is responsible for approximately 85 percent of world maple syrup production. See fact sheet available at: [http://ats.agr.gc.ca/supply/3310\\_e.htm](http://ats.agr.gc.ca/supply/3310_e.htm) [accessed 12 April 2006].

<sup>4</sup> It was in fact dubbed the "Queen of the North Atlantic fishing fleet."

<sup>5</sup> Though other provinces or territories usually use the term 'national' to refer to the federal government and Canada as a whole, Quebec often uses the term to refer to Quebec institutions and symbols. Thus, Quebec's provincial legislature is referred to as the *Assemblée nationale* or National Assembly, the Quebec government's highest award of distinction is the *Ordre national du Québec*, the region surrounding Quebec's provincial capital is referred to as the *capitale-nationale* and Saint-Jean-Baptiste Day, an official holiday only in Quebec, is referred to as the *Fête nationale*.

## 2.1 Case Study: Methodology

To study the use of Canadian national symbols on localised websites and those of Canadian companies, thirty of the largest American corporations and thirty of the largest Canadian were compared. A Canadian company has been defined as one that has its headquarters in Canada and is not a subsidiary of an international company. Sears Canada, for instance, would be considered Canadian even though Sears Roebuck owns more than 50% of its shares<sup>6</sup>.

The American companies were selected based on the Fortune 500 list published by *Fortune* magazine on 18 April 2005, while Canadian companies were selected based on the 2005 Top 1000 Companies rankings compiled by *Report on Business Magazine*, which is published by *The Globe and Mail*, a major Canadian daily newspaper.

The *Fortune* and *Globe and Mail* rankings were chosen for two reasons. First, given the fact that localisation involves a considerable investment of financial and human resources, larger corporations are more likely than smaller companies to have international operations and localised websites for foreign markets. In addition, the corporations that head the list fall under various industries, making the sample more representative of large Canadian and American corporations in general rather than of those in a particular sector. Though energy companies do figure prominently in both lists<sup>7</sup>, *Fortune's* top fifty also includes department stores such as Wal-Mart and Costco, speciality stores such as Home Depot, and manufacturers such as Procter & Gamble, Ford, and Dell, while the *Globe and Mail* top fifty includes banks such as CIBC, RBC, BMO and TD, grocery retailers such as Loblaw's, telephone utilities such as Bell Canada, and manufacturers such as Magna International.

The American companies were selected from the top fifty-three of the Fortune 500, beginning with Wal-Mart (#1) and ending with Merrill Lynch (#53). In order of ranking, the website of each corporation was checked, and if a Canadian version of the site was available, the company was included in the study. Twenty-three of the top fifty-three companies had to be excluded as no Canadian version of their website was available<sup>8</sup>. In each case, the next-ranked company was chosen so that a total of thirty could be included in the case study. Websites were considered localised for Canada when the US parent company had a global gateway from which a 'Canada' or 'Canadian' site could be accessed or when a link to the Canadian version was posted on the American website. When English- and French-Canadian sites were available, both versions were consulted; otherwise, the English-Canadian site was considered to be the localised version<sup>9</sup>. In total, thirty-seven websites representing the thirty companies and their subsidiaries were consulted.

As a point of comparison, thirty Canadian companies were

selected from among the first thirty-nine on the ROB Top 1000 Companies list. For the purposes of this study, when both a holding/parent corporation and its subsidiaries were listed, they were not counted as separate companies, though the websites of both the parent and the subsidiary were consulted. For instance, Power Corp (#26) holds Power Financial Corp (#13), which in turn holds Great West Lifeco (#20). All three corporations were counted as only one of the thirty in this case study, though the website of each was examined. In addition, whenever an additional Canadian version of a website was separate from the main corporate site, both were consulted (e.g. [www.loblaw.com](http://www.loblaw.com), the corporate website for Loblaw Companies Limited, was consulted, as were the websites of its retail locations and brands, including Loblaw's, No Frills, and President's Choice). In total, fifty-two websites were consulted, representing thirty companies and their subsidiaries. These websites were considered 'domestic' in contrast to the 'localised' sites of the American corporations.



Figure 2: Maple leaf incorporated into a logo

A company was considered to be using a national symbol on its website when the symbol was part of the company logo (Figure 2), appeared as part of the background image, was beside a link to a page within the website, or was included in an image on one of the pages within the site (Figure 3). Companies were not considered to be using a national symbol when it appeared on the website because it was obviously part of a logo or image of an outside source. For instance, the homepage of RBC Financial Group, a Toronto-based financial corporation, has a small image in the lower right-hand corner indicating that RBC was named 'Canada's Most Respected Corporation' for 2005<sup>10</sup>. Above this statement is a copy of the design etched onto the base of the trophy. Although this design includes a red maple leaf, RBC was not considered to be using a Canadian symbol because the image came from the sponsor of the survey, not RBC. The image was therefore not designed by or on behalf of

<sup>6</sup> The companies listed in the ROB report are all publicly traded on the Toronto Stock Exchange. The problems that arise from this definition will be explored in the next section.

<sup>7</sup> Of the top thirty-nine companies on the *Globe and Mail* list, for instance, ten are classified as oil- and/or gas-related (oil and gas producers, integrated oil, gas pipelines, etc.).

<sup>8</sup> e.g. Bank of America (#18), Target (#27), Morgan Stanley (#36) and Metlife (#37).

<sup>9</sup> A small percentage of both the localised and domestic sites were available only in English: 18 of the 52 domestic and 6 of the 37 localised.

<sup>10</sup> Manulife Financial has this same image on its homepage.

RBC and served only to link to a news article about the award and to the survey website: <http://www.mostrespected.ca/>.



Figure 3: Example of a Canadian symbol included within an image on a website

## 2.2 Case Study: Findings

Of the thirty American companies with localised websites studied for this paper, a total of twelve incorporated Canadian symbols. Maple leaves were used by six of these companies, while the Canadian flag was used by the other six. American International Group, which owns AIG Life, used a Canadian flag on the AIG website and a maple leaf on that of AIG Life. Only one site, General Motors Canada, used both a maple leaf – as part of its logo – and a flag, while General Electric included both maple leaves and a photograph of the CN Tower, arguably a Canadian national monument, as it is billed as "Canada's wonder of the world" on the CN Tower website ([www.cntower.ca](http://www.cntower.ca)). No other national symbols (e.g. beaver, Parliament) appeared to be used by any of the companies. Table 1 summarises the use of national symbols on these websites.

Fortune Ranking	Company	Canadian website	Symbol(s)	Location of symbol(s)
2	Exxon Mobil	<a href="http://www.exxonmobil.com/Canada-English/HR/HR_Can_Homepage.asp">http://www.exxonmobil.com/Canada-English/HR/HR_Can_Homepage.asp</a>	Canadian flag	HR page (home page of Exxon Mobil Canada. The site has been partially localised.)
3	General Motors	<a href="http://www.gmcanada.com">www.gmcanada.com</a>	1. Maple leaf 2. Canadian flag	1. In GM Canada logo 2. In a photo GM dealership on the Site Map/About Us pages
5	General Electric	<a href="http://www.ge.com/ca">www.ge.com/ca</a>	1. Red maple leaves 2. Green maple leaf 3. Photo of CN Tower	1. Homepage 2. Homepage 3. Our Company page
9	American International Group	<a href="http://www.aig.com/gateway/home/1-113-Canada_index.htm">http://www.aig.com/gateway/home/1-113-Canada_index.htm</a>	Canadian flag	Beside 'change location' link on navigation bar
*		<a href="http://www.aiglife.ca/">http://www.aiglife.ca/</a>	Red maple leaf	On homepage, beside 'AIG Life of Canada'
19	State Farm Insurance	<a href="http://www.statefarm.ca">www.statefarm.ca</a>	Red maple leaf	On homepage, beside 'statefarm.ca'
24	Pfizer	<a href="http://www.pfizer.ca">www.pfizer.ca</a>	Red maple leaf	On homepage, beside 'healthcare in Canada' heading
26	Procter & Gamble	<a href="http://www.pg.com/en_CA/index.jhtml">http://www.pg.com/en_CA/index.jhtml</a>	1. Red maple leaf 2. Red maple leaf	1. Start-up splash page 2. On homepage, beside link to 'P&G global operations'
28	Dell	<a href="http://www.dell.ca/">http://www.dell.ca/</a>	Canadian flag	Beside Dell Canada logo on navigation bar
30	Johnson & Johnson	<a href="http://www.jnjcanada.com">www.jnjcanada.com</a>	Canadian flag	Homepage
32	Time Warner (AOL, Time)	<a href="http://www.aol.ca">www.aol.ca</a>	Red maple leaf	Beside search bar. Note: maple leaf not on Quebec site ( <a href="http://www.aol.qc.ca">www.aol.qc.ca</a> )
52	Wells Fargo	<a href="http://financial.wellsfargo.com/canada/en/index.html">http://financial.wellsfargo.com/canada/en/index.html</a>	Canadian flag	Beside Search text box
53	Merrill Lynch	<a href="http://gmi.ml.com/canada/">http://gmi.ml.com/canada/</a>	1. Canadian flag 2. Canadian flag 3. Grey Maple leaf	1. In an image under navigation bar behind the word 'Canada' 2. In an image on homepage 3. Watermark background image on homepage

Table 1: National symbols used in websites localised for Canada

\* Each of these companies was considered a subsidiary of the *Fortune* – or *Globe and Mail* – ranked company just above it (e.g. Bell Canada and Telesat are subsidiaries of BCE Inc.). With the exception of Bell Canada, these companies did not appear in the Fortune 500 or Globe and Mail top 1000.

G&M Ranking	Company	Website	Symbol(s)	Location of symbol(s)	Head Office
7	Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce	<a href="http://www.cibc.com/ca">http://www.cibc.com/ca</a>	Photo of CN Tower	CIBC world markets page	Toronto, Ontario
10	Petro-Canada	<a href="http://www.petro-canada.ca">www.petro-canada.ca</a>	White maple leaf	Used in logo	Calgary, Alberta
14	BCE Inc.	<a href="http://www.bce.ca/">http://www.bce.ca/</a>			Montreal, Quebec
*	Bell Canada (#15)	<a href="http://www.bell.ca">www.bell.ca</a>			Montreal, Quebec
*		<a href="http://www.telesat.ca/">http://www.telesat.ca/</a>	Red maple leaf	Used in logo	
16	Cdn. Natural Resources	<a href="http://www.cnrl.com">www.cnrl.com</a>	White maple leaf	Used in logo	Calgary, Alberta
18	Canadian National Railway Co.	<a href="http://www.cn.ca">www.cn.ca</a>	Canadian flag	On the homepage, in an image of a small, red CN train filled with people. Both US and Canadian flags are flying on the train.	Montreal, Quebec
19	Shell Canada	<a href="http://www.shell.ca">www.shell.ca</a>	1. Orange maple leaf 2. Canadian flag 3. Red maple leaves	1. Photo to mark the link to the 'code of ethics' page under About Shell - How we work 2. In a photograph of Shell's Peace River Complex (Shell for Businesses – Natural Gas & Co-products – Asphalt) 3. Photo to mark the link to the 'Shell Canada's Core Values' page under Jobs & Careers – Working for Shell Canada	Calgary, Alberta
*		<a href="http://www.sunoco.ca/">http://www.sunoco.ca/</a>	Canadian flag	Within a Sunoco poster advertising the 'Ron Fellows Karting Championship' on the Community page. The poster is part of an image of race cars speeding around a corner	
24	Husky Energy	<a href="http://www.huskyenergy.ca">www.huskyenergy.ca</a>	Maple tree branch	Photo on the About Husky – Health Safety & Environment page	Calgary, Alberta
31	Nexen Inc.	<a href="http://www.nexeninc.com">http://www.nexeninc.com</a>	Red maple leaf	Used in logo	Calgary, Alberta
34	Talisman Energy	<a href="http://www.talisman-energy.com/">www.talisman-energy.com/</a>	Photo of a maple tree	On the About Us page	Calgary, Alberta
35	Enbridge Inc.	<a href="http://www.enbridge.com">www.enbridge.com</a>	Photo of Enbridge van with CN tower in far background	On the Library page	Calgary, Alberta
40	Ipsco Inc.	<a href="http://www.ipsco.com">www.ipsco.com</a>	Canada goose	Used in logo	Regina, Saskatchewan

**Table 2:** National symbols used in the websites of Canadian companies

\* Each of these companies was considered a subsidiary of the *Fortune* – or *Globe and Mail* – ranked company just above it (e.g. Bell Canada and Telesat are subsidiaries of BCE Inc.). With the exception of Bell Canada, these companies did not appear in the *Fortune* 500 or *Globe and Mail* top 1000.

The websites of the thirty Canadian companies and their subsidiaries also included Canadian symbols, to almost the same extent: thirteen of the fifty-two sites – representing eleven of the thirty companies – had images of maple leaves or trees, the Canadian flag, a beaver<sup>11</sup> or the CN Tower on their sites. Many of the websites in this group were the corporate sites intended both for Canadians and international users and hence would not necessarily focus on the company's 'Canadianness'; however, some of the .com sites included national symbols, while many of the .ca sites did not. For instance, none of the Loblaw subsidiaries or brands – including No Frills, Fortinos, Maxi, Zehrs Markets and Independent – used Canadian symbols, though each of these latter sites has been localised for users within the province(s) where that chain of grocery stores is located. This shows that a site does not have to be targeted to just Canadians for a company to highlight its Canadian roots. Table 2 summarises the use of national symbols on these websites.

As Tables 1 and 2 illustrate, Canadian symbols are used on both domestic and localised websites. In both sample groups, the maple leaf and Canadian flag were favoured over other official or semi-official symbols, and though these emblems were most commonly located on the homepages of localised sites and in the logos of domestic sites, they were also found on various other pages.

The results raise intriguing questions, among which are what the national symbols are intended to represent and what their function is supposed to be. On the localised sites, one can reasonably assume that a Canadian flag – as used on the Canadian version of the AIG website, for instance – is intended to help users distinguish one locale from another and signal that the parent company is making an effort to be part of the Canadian community. This assumption is supported by the fact that of the thirty-seven localised websites in this study – including those that did not incorporate national symbols – only two, those of General Motors Canada and AIG Assurance<sup>12</sup>, did not appear to have a link to their parent company. Thus, the fact that these localised websites are part of a larger, global operation is not actively concealed from users in the targeted locale, regardless of whether or not national symbols are used.

Yet the function of national symbols is not necessarily the same in the domestic websites. Because a Canadian-owned company is actually part of the Canadian 'imagined community', the national symbols on its website signal not only that the site is intended for the English- and/or French-Canadian locales, but also that both the company and Canadian users share the same imagined identity. The

Canadian symbols create a bond (see Cerulo 1995, p.16) between the company and the user, appealing to the latter's sense of collective identity, belonging and patriotic desire to support local businesses. The symbol may or may not achieve this effect, but it certainly performs this function.

And here lies the issue upon which further reflection is merited. Unless a user actively searches though a website to determine whether the company is in fact Canadian, how is he or she supposed to know what the national symbol is intended to represent? When an image of a maple leaf, Canadian flag, or Canadian monument is found on a home or start-up splash page of a .ca website, a user's first inclination would be to identify the company as Canadian, whether or not this is actually the case.

The issue is made more complicated by the fact that in some ways a subsidiary of an American company is still a part of Canada, though not technically owned by Canadians<sup>13</sup>. Both GE and General Motors Canada, for instance, have long histories in Canada and employ thousands of Canadians. GE's first manufacturing facility in Canada was opened in 1892, while General Motors Canada was established when GM bought the family-run and Canadian-owned McLaughlin Motor Car Company in 1918<sup>14</sup>.

In other cases, a Canadian company, though not a subsidiary of a larger, international operation, may not be entirely Canadian-owned. As mentioned earlier, Sears Canada is not a subsidiary of Sears Roebuck<sup>15</sup>, since Sears Canada was actually formed as a 50-50 partnership between The Robert Simpson Company, a Canadian retailer, and Sears Roebuck in 1953. However, Sears Roebuck has since increased its ownership of Sears Canada: in 1984 it held 62.6% of the company, but by 1996 it held a smaller majority of 55% of shares<sup>16</sup>. As ownership changes hands over time, does a Canadian company become more or less Canadian? And if so, should its 'right' to use Canadian symbols be revoked? Corporate ownership is often difficult to precisely determine, which only adds to the ambiguity surrounding what national symbols really represent on commercial websites.

Even the legislation related to the use of Canadian symbols does not completely elucidate the issue. Several symbols are protected by Canadian law. The national flag and coat of arms, for instance, are protected by *The Trade Marks Act*, which forbids commercial use of these symbols without permission from the federal government's Department of Canadian Heritage<sup>17</sup>. The maple leaf itself is protected by both an international treaty (*Paris Convention for the*

<sup>11</sup> While the current Bell Canada site does not have any Canadian symbols, the beta version, which was available for a short time in early 2006, included the only image of a beaver found on any of the sites in this case study. These beavers, named Frank and Gordon, are part of a larger advertising campaign. They can still be found at a Bell microsite: <http://www.frankandgordon.ca/>.

<sup>12</sup> GM Canada does, however, outline its history in Canada and its links to General Motors. See: [http://www.gmcanada.com/inm/gmcanada/english/about/OverviewHist/hist\\_gm\\_canada.html](http://www.gmcanada.com/inm/gmcanada/english/about/OverviewHist/hist_gm_canada.html) [accessed 17 April 2006], while AIG Assurance details its relationship to AIG at <http://www.assuranceaig.ca/aboutus.asp> [accessed 17 April 2006].

<sup>13</sup> Thanks to the referee of a previous paper for this point.

<sup>14</sup> Moreover, Sam McLaughlin remained president of GM Canada until 1945 and Chairman of the board until his death in 1972. Full history available at [http://www.gmcanada.com/inm/gmcanada/english/about/OverviewHist/hist\\_gm\\_canada.html](http://www.gmcanada.com/inm/gmcanada/english/about/OverviewHist/hist_gm_canada.html) [accessed 17 April 2006].

<sup>15</sup> #45 on the Fortune 500 list.

<sup>16</sup> See the Sears History feature available at [http://www.sears.ca/e/corporate/about\\_home.html#](http://www.sears.ca/e/corporate/about_home.html#) [accessed 17 April 2006].

*Protection of Industrial Property*) and Canadian legislation (*Order in Council P.C. 1965 – 1623*), though the exact symbol referred to is the 11-point maple leaf (Figure 1) that appears on the Canadian flag. It is likely that because of these regulations, the maple leaves included on sites such as Procter & Gamble or Merrill Lynch are not exactly the same as the 11-point trademarked symbol protected by the Canadian government. In this way, the symbol itself can still be used in an effort to create a bond between the corporation and website users without actually infringing on trademark laws.

Yet, even if the maple leaves incorporated into a localised or domestic website are not identical to the 11-point leaf officially recognised and protected by the Canadian government, they still function in much the same way as their official counterpart. A maple leaf – and other Canadian symbols – will appeal to a user's sense of collective identity, regardless of whether or not it has eleven points and is identical to the one on the Canadian flag. And because any national symbol will operate on more than one level, no company can be sure that it will be received and interpreted as intended.

Consider, for instance, the fact that in Canada national symbols do not evoke the same reaction from all Canadians. Supporters of Quebec independence or sovereignty often view the Canadian flag and maple leaf negatively. The *Parti québécois*, a secessionist provincial political party, for instance, once refused federal funding for renovations to the Quebec City zoo and aquarium because the grant was tied to the condition that bilingual signs be posted and the Canadian flag fly over both buildings for forty years. This offer was decried as "une tentative de relativiser notre statut national" ["an attempt to dilute our national status"<sup>18</sup>], and the Quebec government instead funded the entire 38 million dollar project itself (Lessard 2001, p.A1; Séguin 2001, p.A01). Yet only one of the sites in this study seemed aware that the maple leaf could potentially have a negative, rather than a positive, effect on a user's reception of the local site: while the AOL English-Canadian website included a red maple leaf, this symbol was not found on the AOL French-language Quebec site, though no official Quebec symbols such as the flag or fleur-de-lys were used instead<sup>19</sup>. AOL thus differentiates between English Canadians, who are expected to be receptive to the maple leaf, and French Canadians, who may not be.

National symbols, then, risk not only being misinterpreted by users, but also, in some cases, acting contrary to the corporation's intention: instead of creating a bond between users and the company, red maple leaves and Canadian flags may actually alienate certain segments of the intended audience, who do not consider the national flag and other official emblems representative of their national identity. Yet, using the official symbols of a particular group of

Canadians (e.g. fleur-de-lys for Quebecers, especially the French speakers) to better reach a group that feels little attachment to the national symbol would simply create more problems, since an additional site would have to be created to target this locale. Instead of offering English- and French-Canadian sites, a company would ideally have to create one for English Canada, one for French Canada (since French speakers live throughout the country) and yet another for Quebec, available in at least two languages, as both English and French speakers reside within the province. Localisers would be creating largely unnecessary segmentation and additional websites simply to include various official symbols that may not even be received as intended. And the smaller the group targeted by the localised site, the less likely the company is to see a significant return on its investment.

As the results of this case study indicate, Canadian and American companies do not uniformly use national symbols on their (localised) websites. Since approximately half of both the American and Canadian companies included some officially recognised symbol, it is unclear what the symbols are supposed to represent. At best, they are used haphazardly by companies and are included or removed when sites are redesigned. No national symbols were found on the current Wal-Mart Canada site, for instance, though in 2005 a red maple leaf appeared on the home page beside the "Welcome to Wal-Mart Canada Corp." heading. Canadian website users are therefore receiving unclear messages about a company's status in Canada. They may not realise that a Canadian company without a national symbol on its site is in fact Canadian, and they may mistakenly believe an American company is Canadian owned or has its headquarters in Canada simply because it uses maple leaves, maple trees or the Canadian flag somewhere on its website.

## Conclusion

As discussed, national symbols in localisation have a dual nature. Superficially, they are accessories used to designate the locale for which a website has been designed. But because they also have a more figurative function – that of reaffirming collective identity – they may be interpreted by some users as an indication that both the company and the user are part of the same imaginary nation represented by the symbol and thus share the same historic roots and core values.

The goal of localisation, notes Yunker (2003, p.18), is not to "trick" users into thinking a company is local, but rather to let them know that the company understands the needs and wants of users in a given locale. Are national symbols necessary for transmitting this latter message? Not necessarily. In fact, I would argue that precisely because localisation is not supposed to deceive users, a corporation

<sup>17</sup> See the Government of Canada, Canadian Heritage page at [http://www.pch.gc.ca/progs/cpsc-cesp/sc-cs/commuse\\_e.cfm](http://www.pch.gc.ca/progs/cpsc-cesp/sc-cs/commuse_e.cfm) for further details.

<sup>18</sup> English version from the Globe and Mail (Séguin 2001, p.A01)

<sup>19</sup> Appropriately so, since French speakers live in several provinces and not just Quebec and some French-speaking users of the AOL French-Canadian page would therefore not identify with the fleur-de-lys or Quebec flag.

should carefully consider how national symbols might be interpreted before deciding whether or not to include them in a localised website. Localisers would also be wise to consider the political implications of incorporating federal symbols into websites when such symbols risk alienating or, at the very least annoying, users in the locale.

National symbols are not the only way of appealing to a locale in which collective values are very strong. Focus can still be placed on the company's place in and contributions to the area by highlighting its involvement in the local community, its donations to local charities, the number of jobs it has created within the region, etc. In this way, the chance for users to misinterpret a company's intentions or origins would be reduced and fewer users would be likely to be antagonised, while the company's contributions to the locale would not be overlooked.

Experimental research into user reception and interpretation of symbols in websites would complement this study and help provide more definite conclusions about whether these emblems are being interpreted as localisers intended.

### References

**Anderson, B. (1983)** *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London & New York: Verso.

**Bell, D. (2001)** *An Introduction to Cybercultures*, New York: Routledge.

**Cerulo, K. A. (1995)** *Identity Designs: The Sights and Sounds of a Nation*, New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press.

**Geisler, M. E. (2005)** 'What Are National Symbols and What do They Do to Us?' in Geisler, M. E., ed., *National Symbols, Fractured Identities: Contesting the National Narrative*, Middlebury, Vermont: Middlebury College Press, xiii – xlii

**Globe and Mail (2005)** *Top 1000 Companies* [online], available: <http://www.globeinvestor.com/series/top1000/tables/companies/2005/> [accessed 7 April 2006].

**Government of Canada, Canadian Heritage (2004)** *The Symbols of Canada* [online], available: [http://www.pch.gc.ca/progs/cpsc-ccsp/sc-cs/index\\_e.cfm](http://www.pch.gc.ca/progs/cpsc-ccsp/sc-cs/index_e.cfm) [accessed 8 April 2006].

**Hall, S. (1996)** 'The Question of Cultural Identity' in Hall, S., Held, D., Hubert, D. and Thompson, K., eds., *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies*, Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 595 – 634.

**'Largest U.S. Corporations' (2005)**, *Fortune*, 151(8), F1 – F20.

**Lessard, D. (2001)** 'Le drapeau canadien, " un bout de chiffon rouge "!' lance Landry', *La Presse*, 24 jan, A1.

**Lommel, A. (2003)** *The Localization Industry Primer*, 2nd ed., Féchy, Switzerland: Localization Industry Standards Association [online], available at: <http://www.lisa.org/products/primer.html> [accessed 8 August 2005].

**Province of Nova Scotia, Department of Tourism, Culture & Heritage (2004)** *Bluenose: A Canadian Icon* [online], available: <http://www.gov.ns.ca/nsarm/virtual/bluenose/> [accessed 13 April 2006].

**Séguin, R. (2001)** 'Quebec's Bernard Landry on the Maple Leaf: "A piece of red rag"', *The Globe and Mail*, 24 Jan, A1.

**Singh, N. and Pereira, A. (2005)** *The Culturally Customized Web Site: Customizing Web Sites for the Global Marketplace*, Oxford: Elsevier.

**Smith, A. D. (1991)** *National Identity*, Reno, Nevada: University of Nevada Press.

**Yunker, J. (2003)** *Beyond Borders: Web Globalization Strategies*, Indianapolis: New Riders.



*Julie McDonough teaches in the School of Translation and Interpretation at the University of Ottawa, where she is currently pursuing a PhD in Translation and Canadian Studies. A freelance translator and revisor, Julie has also participated in the University of Ottawa's*

*Bilingual Canadian Dictionary Project as a French-English lexicographer. She holds an M.A. and a B.A. in Translation from the University of Ottawa and York University, respectively. Julie can be reached at [julielaura.mcdonough@uottawa.ca](mailto:julielaura.mcdonough@uottawa.ca).*