

Towards a National Strategy for Digital Inclusion

A discussion document adopted by Telecommunities Canada (TC)¹
to support participation in public forums on the role of broadband in social change

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January 19, 2010

Addressing social and economic disadvantage in an Internet Economy

Canada is a long way from achieving universal broadband access, especially in rural and remote areas. But the critical issue is not access to broadband technologies. Universal broadband coverage is not the same as universal capacity to use those technologies for development. Regardless of urban or rural, some people will remain marginalized even when everyone is online. It's not enough to give those who are excluded basic access to the technologies. It requires different social skills as much as different technical skills to come in from the cold of digital exclusion.

"Digital inclusion" means that we don't forget those who, for what ever reason, are unable to "connect" effectively. It means that all citizens have the means, skills and tools to integrate the internet comfortably into their lives. Only then will we see the advent of new products and services, new and rewarding jobs, increased knowledge, enhanced and meaningful communications and active participation in the institutions and processes of government, society and even of family. Only then will we achieve the productivity gains needed to drive our economy and society into the 21st century.

World development statistics show us that it matters how a country decides to use its money - that social change comes before economic change. For example, the speed of development moves much faster if you are healthy first than if you are wealthy first.² The intention of a national strategy for digital inclusion would be to ensure the well-being and economic productivity of our communities by enhancing the capacity of their most disadvantaged members to be included in daily life online.

Community services sector productivity

Public policy is not yet supporting the transition of our communities into the digital age. Canada does not have a blueprint for how, in an Internet Economy, the uses of information and communications technologies can be made to serve Canada's socio-economic development, never mind how we can assist those who such an economy excludes. When such a plan emerges, it will not be about technology. But it will encompass the uses of technology for community development and the ways that collaborative tools promote the effectiveness of the community services sector.

Because we are already well into an Internet Economy, Canada's community services sector now has hundreds of thousands of people involved in the provision of digital inclusion programs. We must not ignore their experience.

The shapers of Canadian public policy need to place more value on the productivity and innovative capacity of the community services sector. Effective community-based agencies know how to compete for, aggregate and leverage meager resources from many different sources into significant social and economic outcomes. In the same way that they have always survived by innovating, they are now successfully experimenting with new groups and new kinds of groups. Their effectiveness is the critical component of community resilience and self-reliance

But how can a community collaboratively do this? How does community converge around common cause from a citizen's perspective? Much of the infrastructure of the community services sector still remains organized into vertical silos. Thoughtful use of information and communications technologies can and will support a horizontal integration and networking of community services. A well-defined digital inclusion strategy will reinforce the ability of communities to effectively plan and manage their local resources.

Telecentres

Internationally, "telecentres" is the word used for what Canadians have called "community access." A telecentre is a public place where people can access computers, the internet, and other digital technologies that enable people to gather information, create, learn, and communicate with others while they develop essential 21st-century digital skills. A telecentre provides public access to a variety of online tools and resources in the context of demographically and socio-economically dynamic communities, ever changing technologies, and locally driven social and digital initiatives.

In effect, assisted by the Community Access Program (CAP),³ networks of telecentres have become a critical part of the infrastructure of many communities and social service agencies across Canada. Strengthening, deepening and intensifying on-going relationships amongst those telecentre networks and their support partners through a vibrant, sustainable telecentre community is critical to enhancing the social and economic impacts of telecentres on community development and digital inclusion in Canada.

In the process of designing a National Digital Inclusion Strategy, we need to define and evolve a National Network of Community-based Telecentres that:

1. Recognizes the potential of every Canadian to engage with the Internet economy more as an active producer than as a passive consumer.
2. Is based on a national strategy developed through open dialogue with all telecentre stakeholders.

3. Strengthens and expands interactive telecentre networking in order to intensify knowledge sharing about best practices.
4. Is governed by a group officially designated as a “collaborative learning community of stakeholders,” so that shared best practices and learning govern the program direction.
5. Has adequate training capacity for operating it (i.e. a National Telecentres Network Academy that trains telecentre managers⁴ by sharing the online learning capacities of participating agencies).
6. Has a connection from it to broader Canadian national strategies for the uses of information and communications technologies in socio-economic development.
7. Has a multi-stakeholder plan and financing for a transition to local control.

Beyond CAP: a future for digital inclusion

CAP was an infrastructure program (build it and get out). But an infrastructure model does not address the dynamic reality of processes for community development online. CAP was expected to sunset. But community experience in its delivery reveals an added functional responsibility in social programs and community economic development. What CAP proves is that, in a society that is online, people marginal to that society have their burden increased by the gap between their needs for access to processes of digital inclusion and their capacity to use them.

We call for development of a National Strategy for Digital Inclusion that draws upon the experience of the changing nature of social services delivery and community development that Canadian communities already have. There is an opportunity for open discussion of a National Strategy for Digital Inclusion that moves the focus towards telecentres and local governments.

It's about an approach to a public policy shaping process, not the design of telecentres. The roles and functions for telecentres will vary as various local agencies apply them to what they see as their local needs. Getting acceptance at all levels of government to a community-based approach for the support of digital inclusion will involve:

1. A need for open forums for discussion of the existing program's "lessons learned" and its future potential to increase the resilience and self-reliance of communities under an evolved program.
2. New public policy that endorses the role of digital inclusion in Canada's national strategies for the uses of information and communications technologies in socio-economic development.
3. Support of a new federal-provincial "transitional" program, allowing for a staged transfer of primary operational responsibility to the provinces along with an annual federal funding in recognition of on-line delivery of federal services and programs. It's the

provinces that have the most direct involvement with the community-based organizations and institutions that act as delivery points for digital inclusion services as essential infrastructure. It's that local control that will make the program relevant to community-based economic development.

Good public policy enables participation

Public policy does not change in a vacuum. It follows from changes in society. Governments are not isolated from profound changes in social relationship and, therefore, how the nature of citizenship alters in the face of daily life online.

Although still rare, participatory forums to address this issue are beginning to occur at the community-level.⁵ There are communities that have advanced digital inclusion via the negotiation of community benefits agreements during explorations of locally controlled broadband initiatives. There are communities that have held intense dialogues over the best routes to social change in a digital age. Their citizens are learning that it is hard work to negotiate the transition from vertical institutions to horizontal networked relationships.

What's missing from Canadian public policy is any understanding of the radical transformation in the way we do things represented by the Internet's existence. We strongly believe that the best uses of the Internet are:

- To increase the capacity of local communities to meet their particular needs.
- To increase the capacity of collaborating individuals in those communities to decide the context of the problems they face for themselves.

The drafters of a National Strategy for Digital Inclusion would seek to understand where and how people gain the confidence to appropriate information and communications technologies for their own use. And they would seek to understand the conditions under which that appropriation gets channeled to collective and constructive purposes. What is needed to move towards these goals?

1. An open and distributed process of dialogue (public forums, wikis, websites etc) about a national strategy for digital inclusion.
2. A strategy document that summarizes the conclusions of that dialogue.
3. The means of carrying that strategy forward into the kinds of federal-provincial decision-making forums that are beginning to address a full national strategy for the uses of information and communications technologies in Canada's development.

An acknowledgement

To the memory of **Gaylen Duncan**. He embraced the task of understanding and expressing digital inclusion with his usual curiosity and enthusiasm in the face of any impossible dream. He readily shared his vast experience of how to make sure that economic and political power is applied to just ends. If only he were here, I would tell him that, “Yes, Gaylen, we will make it happen.”

Endnotes

¹¹ Telecommunities Canada is a community of practice about the uses of online networks for community development. We act to understand and shape the uses of ICTs in our communities. Community networking practices play a significant role in facilitating face-to-face local social interaction. We can and do remind Canada’s public policy debates that there are now many existing networked communities that are experienced in the effective use of ICTs for community development. Together with like-minded groups, our goal is to connect theory, policy and practice in ways that expand and improve the ability of communities to design their own future. TC has become a significant repository of, and network for, the local experience gained through public participation in the Community Access Program. Telecommunities Canada (TC) advocates for control of open broadband networks as a local responsibility. <http://www.tc.ca>

² Hans Rosling: Debunking third-world myths with the best stats you've ever seen. TED, posted June 2006. <http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/view/id/92>

³ “Thanks to the support of the Community Access Program (CAP) and its companion youth initiative program (CAP-YI), community access centers have been the backbone of digital inclusion in Canada. Along with young interns and a legion of volunteers, they provide job search and software training, technology literacy programs, access to community services, and cultural integration opportunities. They work with local private and public sector partners to provide services and share experience in many different areas - from basic computer skills to website building. Along the way, thousands of CAP-YI trained youth gain experience that helps them move on in the world.” **The Importance of Digital Inclusion Programs for Canadians:** a support letter for Public Internet Access to Prime Minister Stephen Harper. Internet for Everyone.ca, December 2009. <http://www.internetforeveryone.ca/en/participer/lettre/>

⁴ In organizational theory and practice related to communities of practice online, their role is now called “stewarding technology for communities.” Etienne Wenger, Nancy White and John D. Smith. Digital habitats: stewarding technology for communities. Portland, Oregon, CPSquare, August 2009.

⁵ Examples of open forums on the best routes to socio-economic change in a digital age include:

- **The City that Networks: Transforming Society and Economy Through Digital Excellence.** Report Of The Mayor’s Advisory Council on closing the Digital Divide. Chicago, May 2007. http://egov.cityofchicago.org:80/webportal/COCWebPortal/COC_EDITORIAL/DigitalDivide.pdf
- Dalhousie Student Union, Chebucto Community Network (www.chebucto.ns.ca) and Dalhousie Computer Science Society. **Who is Shaping your Digital Future? a town hall panel discussion.** Halifax. October 26, 2009. <http://www.chebucto.ns.ca/townhall/>
- **Digital Engagement: Technology for social benefit.** A UK blog to address the use of social technology for a social benefit. <http://digitalengagement.org/>

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- Pathways to Technology, First Nations Technology Council (FNTC). **ICT Capacity Development: Building Strong Sustainable Communities.** British Columbia, FNTC, February 2009.
http://www.fntc.info/files/Presentations/2009_ICT%20Capacity%20Plan%20FNTC-ICT%20Summit%20February%2020%202009.pdf
 - Telecommunities Canada (www.tc.ca) and SaveOurNet.ca (<http://saveournet.ca/>) have hosted Open Internet Town Hall events in Vancouver, Ottawa and Toronto, 2009. See also:
<http://www.internetforeveryone.ca/en/accueil/>
 - Tony Vetter, Don MacLean, and Heather Creech. **Projecting the Evolution of the Internet, its Technologies, Communities and Management: Canadian stakeholders' understandings and perceptions of the issues.** Report on a pilot workshop held in Vancouver, British Columbia, March 26–27, 2009. Winnipeg, International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), June 2009.
http://www.iisd.org/pdf/2009/projecting_internet_evolution.pdf