Building Community Computer Networks for All Canadians: Public Ownership, Access and Communication on the Information Highway

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Extended Abstract

Canada has established a unique historical tradition of public sector participation in communication and broadcasting. Described as a convergence between communication and broadcasting, the information highway is a revolutionary medium that has the potential to empower *every user* to produce and consume information. Canadians need an imaginative strategy for public sector participation that will preserve this potential for them.

Sustainable community computer networks offer such a solution. A national network of these public access systems will enable the public sector to deliver content and services to the Canadian public with great savings. The co-ordinated development of these systems across Canada will also mean that it will be the Canadian public that owns and controls its share of the Information Highway.

Community computer networks offer free or low-cost access for everyone, promote community economic development and national competitiveness, respond quickly to the needs of people within communities, foster citizen participation in governance and community development, create avenues for life-long learning, cultural growth and preservation, and may contribute to national unity. As a public good, community computer networks should fall under the purview of the public sector. A public sector strategy needs to be developed to guarantee the growth of community computer networks.

This study concludes that community computer networks, having already done much to promote access and awareness across Canada, should share and be supported in the "official" process of developing the information highway. If all Canadians were given the opportunity and capacity to build their own sustainable community computer networks, public content, access, and participation in the information highway would be ensured from coast to coast.

The collaborative, grassroots development of community computer networks across Canada will in turn create a national public access network, uniquely owned and operated by the Canadian public, which could be used for the delivery of a variety of public services and communication for the common good of the Canadian people.

This study makes the following recommendations:

-> A national public sector network of community networks should be built to enable the public sector to deliver content and services electronically. This network will ensure that 6 million Canadians will be using the information highway regularly by the year 2000 via community networks alone, and that 100have access.

-> A national non-governmental enabling agency should be formed and funded to promote the growth of community computer networks across Canada in the service of all Canadians. This non-profit organization should be run by and for community computer networks; it should be accountable to the Canadian public; and it should collaborate with public sector agencies, government, and industry. It would serve Canadians and develop community computer networks through community organization and extension; public education; partnerships with industry and government in policy-making, research and development; and in administering funds to new community computer networks.

-> $36 million in capital funds, in-kind services, and resources should be allocated over 3 years by national funding partners to support communities in building computer networks.

-> CANARIE should continue to operate CA*Net as a service to the Canadian public, rather than selling Canada's national backbone to corporate interests. CANARIE should also invite representatives of community networks to participate as public interest partners in CANARIE.

-> Follow-on consulting concerning these recommendations and additional discussion of com-

munity network perspectives in policy-making and regulatory processes is critical.

The Federal Government must act quickly to ensure that the unique opportunities that community computer networks afford us can be shared by all Canadians. A rapid and low-cost transition to a national public sector network will ensure that Canadian communities and institutions will be able to make informed decisions in the information age and develop significant competitive advantages by the year 2000. Canada's committment to universal public access will guarantee each individual's _right_to_communicate_ within the emerging global knowledge society.