



*Canadian Research Alliance for Community
Innovation and Networking (CRACIN)*

*Alliance canadienne de recherche pour le
réseautage et l'innovation communautaires*



Youth Interns and the Strategic Deployment of ICTs for Public Access: the Case of the Community Access Youth Internship Program

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October 2006

CRACIN Working Paper No. 15





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The **Canadian Research Alliance for Community Innovation and Networking (CRACIN)** is a four-year partnership between community informatics researchers, community networking practitioners and federal government policy specialists, funded by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). CRACIN brings together researchers and practitioners from across Canada, and internationally, to undertake case studies and thematic research on the enabling uses of new information and communication technologies (ICTs) by communities, and to investigate Canada's national programs and policies for promoting the development and public accessibility of digital networks, applications and services.

CRACIN Working Paper Series Editor: Graham Longford, Post-doctoral Research Fellow, Faculty of Information Studies, University of Toronto

Suggested citation:

Gurstein, R. & Pell, S. (2006) "Youth Interns and the Strategic Deployment of ICTs for Public Access: the Case of the Community Access Youth Internship Program," CRACIN Working Paper No. 15, October 2006, Toronto: Canadian Research Alliance for Community Innovation and Networking.

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Abstract

This paper connects discussions of ICT use as developed through the Canadian government Community Access Program, with the experiences of the CAP Youth Initiative. While it is argued by policy designers that youth internships would bring needed human resources in the form of social and training skills to the technical infrastructure provided by CAP, it was unfortunately the case that the necessary oversight resources, networking opportunities and effective reporting mechanisms were insufficient to support this and as a result the programs have not achieved the degree of success which might otherwise have been possible at the community level.

Introduction

Understanding the problem posed by rapid technological change has occupied a large part of the attention of community network activists and the Canadian federal government over the past decade. Much of the discussion that has occurred in this area has centred on the theme of ‘universal access’ and ways in which to address the ‘digital divide’. Community networks for their part have been attempting to democratize the Internet and allow for meaningful access to, and use of, information and communication technologies (ICTs). Many of their struggles have been in an effort to sustain their operations in the face of funding cuts while their burdens of servicing those who lack technological means are ever expanding. The federal government for its part has also been working toward increasing access and creating the conditions for a competitive economy within a digitized world.

Much of the dissatisfaction that community networks have felt about federal initiatives, such as the Information Highway Advisory Council (IHAC) and its resulting Community Access Program (CAP), has already been well documented.¹ The dominant theme in these discussions has been the schism between government conceptions of access, which tend to focus on the technological infrastructure, and those of community networks, which stress socio-economic factors along with technical ones. CAP, in its creation and continuance, has featured prominently in these discussions as evidence of a lack of ability or willingness by the federal government to adequately address universal access in any sort of sustainable way, outside of one-off grants to build a technological infrastructure.

A noticeable absence in the discussions on the government’s shortcomings in the realm of ‘universal access’ has been CAP’s associated internship program, the CAP Youth Initiative (CAP YI). CAP YI represents the federal government’s attempt to address the need for training and social interaction around ICTs to help further integrate their use by those people facing barriers to connectivity. As it stands, the different conceptualizations of how the term *access* is understood has fundamentally affected the implementation of federally funded programs, such as CAP and CAP YI, at the local level of community networks. Due to a lack of networking and reporting built into these initiatives, much of the work of bridging the digital divide has fallen onto the shoulders of community networks. However, because community networks in many ways lack the resources necessary to promote, even sustain, a program of universal access, these

¹ See, for example: Andrew Clement and Leslie Regan Shade (1996) “What Do We Mean By ‘Universal Access’?: Social Perspectives in a Canadian Context,” URL: http://www.isoc/net96/proceedings/f2/f2_1.htm. Accessed April 15, 2005; Garth Graham and Leslie Regan Shade (1996) “Rhetoric and Reality in Canadian Community Networking,” in *Proceeding of INET 96 (The Internet Society)*, Montreal: June 25-28. URL: http://www.isoc.org/inet96/proceedings/e5/e5_2.htm, accessed on April 15, 2005; Michael Gurstein, (2004) “Effective Use and the Community Informatics Sector: Some Thoughts on Canada’s Approach to Community Technology/Community Access,” in Marita Moll and Leslie Regan Shade, eds., *Seeking Convergence in Policy and Practice: Communications in the Public Interest, Volume 2*, Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 223-243; Marita Moll and Leslie Regan Shade, eds., (2001) *E-Commerce vs. E-Commons: Communications in the Public Interest*, Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives; Marita Moll and Leslie Regan Shade, eds., (2004) *Seeking Convergence in Policy and Practice: Communications in the Public Interest, Volume 2*, Ottawa: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

organizations have frequently lacked the experience or the knowledge to effectively use the monies and resources available through this type of contingent funding.

This paper hopes to bring the training and social dimension of CAP YI into the conversation about the digital divide and universal access. We argue that the strength of CAP YI is its ability to bring forward the social dimension needed to train marginalized groups on ICTs. This dimension has to this point been largely neglected in the current economic model of access reflected in the design of the CAP. As discussed below, each CAP site could through the use of CAP YI be enabled to develop its own unique practices and capacities based on the needs of its users.

To actualize this potential, an effective networking of CAP sites and a means for the retention within individual sites and the overall network of the knowledge gained is required. However, before we can achieve this ideal, it is important to assess the present realities of the use of CAP YI in community networking. In the following section we discuss ICTs within the Canadian context. After that we outline the various federal and community actors involved in universal access. We then move into a specific discussion of the limitations of current networking and reporting mechanisms within CAP YI through a reflection on our experience as Regional Coordinators (RCs) based in the Vancouver Community Network (VCN). We conclude by returning to a broader look at how communities can leverage federal initiatives to serve the ends of ICTs and social development.

Concepts and Context: The digital divide, universal access and the Canadian Information Highway

Before directly addressing the strategic use of CAP YI in organizations such as VCN, context in relation to the debates and concepts used in the discussion of ICTs is needed. In this section, ‘universal access’ will be briefly discussed through an outline of the historical tension between government and community networks’ approach to these terms. In laying out this debate, it becomes clear that negotiating agreement concerning the underlying values of programs, such as CAP and CAP YI, within VCN and community network organizations in general can be a difficult process.

The ‘digital divide’ is the current term to describe what is, in many ways, the *raison d’être* of community networks and federal initiatives, such as CAP and CAP YI. It is the recognition that with the transition to an information society there are those who have the technology to participate and those who do not. The *digital divide* then describes the split between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’ in terms of information and communication technology.

In our current context, the *digital divide* can be said to trace the level of ‘connectedness’ of Canadians on the ‘information highway’.²

Though computers and the Internet are far from being a novelty anymore, there persists a gap between those who have access to, use and are comfortable with these technologies and practices. A survey of Canadians in 2000 revealed that 42 percent of the population had never used the Internet (Longford, 2005: 10). Rideout and Reddick further explain that in terms of access from home, the *digital divide* continues to be a reality (Rideout and Reddick, 2005: 3). The digital divide, as can be expected, overlays already existent socio-economic realities of marginality, which include class, ethnicity, gender, and geographical location. As tends to be the case, First Nations people, those in rural areas, women, the undereducated, the elderly, and people with disabilities are the least connected (Rideout and Reddick, 2005; Pigg and Crank, 2004; Clement and Shade, 1996).

While it is important to understand the map of the ‘digital divide’, it is as important to understand how the use of this language has bounded discussion of universal access to ICTs. ‘Bridging the digital divide’ means making ICTs accessible. Accessibility, at the most basic level, translates into availability of technology, which would include at a minimum a computer and the ability to get online. However, if access is to mean more than just being a possible consumer of information, goods, and services on the Internet; there is good reason to believe that accessibility needs to be thought of beyond the technical level, to include the social aspects that affect the use of ICTs (Clement and Shade, 1996; Graham and Shade, 1996; Gurstein, 2003, 2004).

Equitable access (an already watered down ideal of universal access) requires more than an infrastructure based on equity, affordability, and ubiquity; it requires access to be understood in terms of physical, technical, economic, and social factors that come into play with shifts in technology (Clement and Shade, 1996: 2). Thought of in this sense, access is defined as having the resources, both technical and social, to use the technology available for self-directed ends. This conceptualization moves away from a definition of access that has been predominant in market and government articulations of access as simply ‘use’, and highlights the users needs and desires.

The concept of ‘effective use’ has been utilized to emphasize this non-commercial, self-defined, and participatory understanding of ‘access’ to technology. Gurstein has defined ‘effective use’ as, “The capacity and opportunity to successfully integrate ICTs into the accomplishment of self or collaboratively identified goals” (Gurstein, 2003: 10). This statement stresses that access not be understood as simply *access to* technology, but as the *ability to use* the technology in a way that is meaningful to the individual or group involved. It calls attention to

² “Information Highway” refers to the Internet and online communication technologies, particularly as it was used during the initial phases of government research, consultation, and policy formation in the mid-1990s.

the fact that having ICTs available does not assure that people will use them or that they will use them in ways that are meaningful. As Gurstein, suggests, “The challenge, therefore, is to ensure not simply ‘access’ but ‘effective access’ or ‘use’ – i.e., access which can be used and made effective to accomplish the purposes that individuals might set for themselves within electronic environments” (Gurstein, 2004: 230). This type of definition has much more applicability for community organizations that are struggling to expand the democratic capabilities of ICTs than simply a focus on the availability of technology.

Community networking organizations, local and national, have actively tried to influence Canadian federal policy concerning understandings of, and initiatives taken, to address issues of access. These groups and organizations are committed to universal access in the sense of ‘effective use’, and tend to approach the use of ICTs in a social and community development sense, where the technology serves as a tool for participation within neighbourhoods, nations, and the globe (Longford, 2005: 4). To this end, these organizations have tried to lobby the federal government to adopt policy and create an information infrastructure, in the shape of what has been described as an *e-commons*, that would enable citizens to be actors, not simply recipients, in the development, implementation, and practical use of ICTs within their localized communities (Longford, 2005; Gurstein, 2003, 2004; Clement, et al, 2001; Moll and Shade, 2001; Clement and Shade, 1996; Graham and Shade, 1996).

While participation within an e-commons is the goal of community networks, federal policy in most instances takes the route of market-minded initiatives that privilege competition and passive consumerism on the Internet. This has been evident in the limited effectiveness of such programs as CAP and CAP YI in addressing universal access for those individuals and organizations that are most restricted in their means for using ICTs. Our experience as Regional Coordinators (RCs) enabled us to see how the federal government’s emphasis on economic development through ICTs led to a misaligned relationship between Industry Canada and Human Resources and Development Canada on the one hand and the community networks with the responsibility for implementing CAP and CAP YI on the other. We experienced the frustrations of this disconnection most pointedly in the realm of the networking and reporting mechanisms imposed by the various federal structures, which had the effect of restricting local autonomy and, thus, the implementation of locally appropriate approaches to the access and use of ICTs within individual local communities.

With an understanding of ‘effective access,’ the next part of the paper moves into a discussion of the strategic use of CAP YI in community networks, such as the Vancouver Community Network. We compare the goals of the federal initiatives (CAP, CAP YI), and the community network, (VCN), in the context of the experience as the Regional Coordinators of the CAP YI internship at VCN between July 2004 and March 2005. During this period we were in a

unique position to witness and participate in the successes, failures, and contradictions of the disjunction between CAP, CAP YI, and VCN.³

The Community Access Program (CAP), the CAP Youth Internship Program, and the Vancouver Community Network

Discussions of the varying definitions of access, encourages us to examine the current practices of both government and community networks in applying their understandings of the concept in the realm of policy creation and program implementation. In the following section we will discuss the various interests at stake in providing access for Canadians.

Government programs and community impacts

CAP was initially designed to assist in the installation of and access to the infrastructure of the ‘information highway’ in rural communities⁴ for the Industry Canada-mandated purpose of fostering economic development. By the time the first phase of the program came to an end in 1999, Industry Canada had succeeded in establishing over 5000 public Internet access centers across the country. The second phase of CAP, launched in December 1999, began to target urban communities. While the first phase of CAP focused on reaching all Canadians, regardless of their geographic location, income, or social status, the second phase of the program had a slightly different mandate, which saw a targeting of specific population groups.

In 1996, in response to the demand for training on the technology recently implanted in CAP sites, Industry Canada and what was then Human Resources and Development Canada (HRDC) came together to create the Community Access Program Youth Initiative (CAP YI). The program was designed with the interests of both organizations in mind. Industry Canada wanted an inexpensive way to provide ICT training to people in local communities, while HRDC sought ways to give youth job opportunities while increasing employment numbers.

³ Note that VCN is an exceptional case as far as being a participant in both CAP and CAP YI. VCN acts as the coordinator of the Lower Mainland Network, of which there were 99 CAP sites in 2004-2005. As for CAP YI, VCN was the employer of the youth interns, which is an anomaly in British Columbia since most CAP sites directly employ their interns. It is because of VCN’s pivotal position with both CAP and CAP YI that we were able as Regional Coordinators, to experience the synergies and breakdowns between the goals and practices of these programs. This tension, of course, will be returned to throughout the course of this paper, particularly in the section on VCN.

⁴ Defined as communities in remote or northern locations and communities with less than 50,000 residents.

Falling in line with the objectives of the 1997 Connecting Canadians initiative,⁵ CAP began to consciously target sites that serviced segments of the population for whom access to ICTs was largely blocked. These groups included Aboriginals, seniors, people with low income and low education, and new Canadians. Though the new mandate targeted specific marginalized demographic groups, the program remained economically and rurally focused. The change of mandate did not bring about a change in the structure or implementation of CAP and this oversight resulted in a lack of consideration for the specific needs of CAP sites and their users located in urban and inner city communities where issues such as marginalization due to poverty and mental health are prominent rather than a lack of access to information technology or the Internet.

A tension can thus be seen arising between the initial CAP focus that addressed issues of regional economic development and renewal within a rural context with its later (and maladapted) application to urban areas and urban issues of neighborhood and individual rehabilitation and integration into a knowledge based society. Managing this mismatch between the expectations of Industry Canada and the realities of urban communities inevitably fell disproportionately on the largely unprepared and ill-resourced shoulders of urban community networks such as VCN.

This lack of foresight into the local implementation of ICTs is most blatantly obvious in the case of the various programs for putting the activities of governments on-line. As an example, various government forms, such as the British Columbia Social Assistance application form, became only available on-line with the responsibility being placed on CAP sites to provide access to the forms and to introduce welfare recipient to the process.⁶ However, the resources needed to bridge the accessibility gaps for social assistance recipients - which inevitably include issues such as literacy and an understanding of bureaucratic procedures – were not provided for either in the CAP nor CAP YI mandates or budgets, with a resultant downloading of responsibility for bridging these gaps to already stretched community networks like VCN.

As a result, by participating in CAP, urban sites are taking on the responsibility for the delivery of these services, the supporting technology (and its upkeep) and for training the public,

⁵ In the 1997 Speech from the Throne, the government reiterated its commitment to make Canada the world's most connected country. This policy direction took shape under the now defunct Connecting Canadians Initiative, whose pillars included Canada On-line, Smart Communities, Canadian Content On-line, Electronic Commerce, Canadian Governments On-line, and Connecting Canada to the World which were supported by new and existing Industry Canada activities and programs, which included CAP.

<http://www.ic.gc.ca/cmb/welcomeic.nsf/ICPages/Milestones#connectedness1>

⁶ See Rideout and Reddick (2005) for a discussion on the significance of government forms going exclusively online, and the government online consultation process where the unanimous opinion of those involved was that this would be bad policy and practice. It should be noted that while we see this as an issue within CAP sites, it also points to the lack of coordination between federal, provincial, and municipal government in the move to put essential services online.

in addition to maintaining their already existing services.⁷ This work is largely done without a corresponding increase in resources, including social, economic, or technological, from the CAP or CAP YI programs.

Examples of this lack of structural support and acknowledgement of offloading social welfare programs and services by government onto under-funded community organization is evidenced in many of the CAP sites within VCN's network.⁸ A recent example is the case of the UBC Learning Exchange, a CAP site located in Vancouver's inner-city. A welfare office previously located across the street from the site closed its doors, referring its clients to the CAP computers across the street in order to fill out their social assistance applications. The UBC Learning Exchange, a site dedicated to basic skills development in the community such as language programs for New Canadians, found that their space, resources, and limited computer terminals were suddenly overloaded with people who had previously been using the designated (and directly government funded) governmental social assistance site (both for its technical and human resources). The UBC Learning Exchange found itself in the impossible situation of being committed (and required as a CAP site) to provide public access to ICTs, while at the same time having to take up the slack for what had previously been a government provided service, and without any additional resources or training to support these areas.

The Vancouver Community Network

As Industry Canada's community partner, the Vancouver Community Network (VCN) is responsible for overseeing, at a local level, the implementation of both CAP and CAP YI according to the goals and guidelines set out by Industry Canada. VCN's role in the delivery of these programs is critical both for the "success" of the program by Industry Canada's standards, but also for fulfilling its own objective of acting as the "regional freenet" for British Columbia's Lower Mainland. VCN was founded in 1993 with the mission to "operate[...] and promote[...] a free, publicly accessible, non-commercial, community computer utility in the Lower Mainland of

⁷ While not within the scope of this paper, this "downloading" in this way of government services raises questions of privacy and security of personal information, particularly when thinking about the skills and resources of the generally very youthful CAP YI interns who are placed in CAP sites with only limited training and are expected to assist users in filling out what should in practice be confidential on-line forms and in handling other such sensitive materials.

⁸ One of the ways in which community organizations have dealt with this on-going downloading of social responsibility has been to rely on short term funding programs like CAP and CAP YI in order to respond to the increasing demand and particularly in response to the need for access to technology. The way CAP sites were created when the CAP mandate expanded in 1999 involved pre-existing community organizations of all kinds applying to Industry Canada for funding under the CAP program. Initially, this funding was slated to be spent primarily on infrastructure like computer terminals and printers, and high speed Internet connections. However, the amount allotted to each CAP site did not allow for the hiring of a permanent administrator, technician or instructor to support the functioning of the CAP site. Rather, it was expected that the host organizations would support the running of the CAP sites from their own often-meagre human resources. Of course, it was quickly realised by the community organizations participating in the program as well as by CAP's administrators that this was not enough and CAPs and CAP organizations have been lobbying government for funding adequate to the demands placed on them ever since.

BC which provides a public space on the Internet,” and with the goal of supporting “free, accessible electronic creation and exchange of the broadest range of information, experience, ideas and wisdom.”⁹

VCN became involved with CAP from the outset of CAP’s expansion into urban communities, acting as the regional hub for community organizations in the Lower Mainland who were being funded through the program. VCN managed the administration for CAP for at first 7, then up to 250 and more recently 99 different sites spread across a geographical area which encompasses Vancouver and its suburbs, and extending inland to a radius of 100 km. Currently, CAP sites are located in schools, libraries, community centres, churches, low income housing developments and employment and training centres. VCN receives a large part of its operational and project funding through administering Industry Canada programs like CAP, but it has also been engaged in projects with the Vancouver Foundation, the United Way, HRDC, Health Canada, and the BC Ministry of Multiculturalism, among others.

Local CAP networks like VCN have an interest in acquiring funding, but also to shape the program to serve their local needs, which at time may or at other times may not be congruent with the goals of CAP as laid out by Industry Canada. Often, community networks will take these goals, and expand upon and customize them to include the specific requirements for success in their local community. As an illustration of the ability of community networks to shape the priorities of CAP as it is delivered on the ground, VCN has targeted sites like Spartacus Books, (a small, volunteer-run bookstore and community education centre which hosts a 2 computer CAP lab)¹⁰, the Gallery Gachet (an art gallery and studio space in the Downtown Eastside for people with mental health issues)¹¹ and the Purple Thistle Centre (an alternative education centre for street-involved youth)¹². These sites, among others, indicate a move away from strictly economic to social or personal development priorities.

VCN, as the network hub, has communicated the demands from the urban CAP environment back to Industry Canada by recommending these sites for funding and by placing CAP YI interns in the sites to liaise between the community organizations in question and VCN as the network hub. VCN's position as a “broker” between the communities as represented by the CAP sites and the CAP government administrators has been beneficial, in so far as they have managed to achieve some leeway in shaping the program to be responsive to the needs expressed at the local level.

Since 2001, VCN has been responsible for hiring and deploying interns participating in the Community Access Program Youth Initiative (CAP YI) to the CAP sites across the Lower Mainland. Unlike other CAP YI networks, VCN has the exceptional opportunity to interview and

⁹ <http://www.vcn.bc.ca>

¹⁰ <http://www.spartacusbooks.org>

¹¹ <http://www.gachet.org/>

¹² <http://www.purplethistle.ca/>

hire youth interns directly, and place them in CAP sites. The close geographical proximity of VCN to the CAP sites in its network has allowed the interns hired by VCN to have direct and personal contact with VCN for meetings and training. The CAP YI Regional Coordinators (RCs) housed within VCN, were able to visit most of the sites at which interns were placed.¹³ In other CAP YI networks in BC, interns were hired directly by the site in which they worked and had minimal contact with their RCs and little to no contact with other interns working in their region.

Despite all of its best intentions, the various initiatives that involved VCN and youth interns only saw moderate successes. VCN suffered from a lack of continuity in program funding, as well as an evident inability to retain vital information from one year to the next, which would have allowed the building upon of previous knowledge and strengths. Generally speaking, the structure of the funding available through the government program contract system did not allow for a continuity in staffing and a related transfer of knowledge, as the previous year's project staff were already gone by the time the funding was available to contract with the succeeding year's staff. Thus there was almost no possibility of building up an organizational memory for the program.

Case Study: CAP YI in the context of VCN and CAP

Other observers have already discussed the lack of networking and feedback mechanisms of CAP.¹⁴ This analysis can be extended to CAP YI in terms of the need for transparent feedback channels that would connect practices on the ground with policy makers in Ottawa.

The need to use CAP YI strategically is of course, very considerable as the interns are the face of the community network, Industry Canada, and HRSDC to the public. Their visibility and access in/to the community is, in a certain sense, key to the adoption and success of the CAP program, in all its aspects, in the community. As will be discussed in the following sections, CAP YI can and has been used strategically by community networks like VCN. Though there has been moderate success in this regard, there are several problems endemic to the program, which need resolution before these successes can be considered sustainable benefits for the community.

¹³ For an article written about the site visits we conducted, see the article written by Aurelea Mahood "The Bicycle Girls" <<http://bcyk-tech.net/the-bicycle-girls#VwTsDx7p3jexR4y46QbrDg>>

¹⁴ Gurstein's comments about CAP, easily apply to CAP YI. He states: A consequence of this [lack of a research or program evaluation/assessment activity] has been that the program had very little capacity for self-criticism or adjustment, or for effectively evolving in response to very rapidly changing technologies and accumulating experiences with the technologies as they became globally dispersed. The result was a program that was top-down and ill-adaptive (Gurstein, 2004: 235). Also see Clement, et al, 2001; Moll and Shade, 2001; and Graham and Shade, 1996.

Policies for developing programs such as CAP and CAP YI when designed at the national level may bear little resemblance to how they are articulated with and respond to the needs at the local level. The result is often a discrepancy between the expectations and outcomes anticipated (and desired) by the funders and the results as realized by administrators on the ground. The implication for the authors, as Regional Coordinators at VCN, was the reality of having to manage the difference in the requirements and expectation of the program and how we were able to implement it, when dealing with interns, CAP site operators, and Industry Canada. This was most evident where issues of access and employment were concerned.

Industry Canada's mandate is clear about being concerned to find ways to enhance the performance of business. When it became evident that in this program this would not be possible with one-off grants to enhance local technology infrastructure (which is how Industry Canada had first conceptualized the program), CAP was expanded to include a social aspect by bringing in CAP YI interns as community-based youth computer trainers. However, though CAP YI is co-located with CAP, it is funded through a separate agency that has its own objectives. Indeed, one of the more substantial hurdles encountered during our time as Regional Coordinators was that CAP and CAP YI were not structured so as to run concurrently. This meant that interns might be working at CAP sites which had not yet received CAP funding, or alternatively, that when sites had received funding and were in need of an intern to provide training and technical support, none were available because the CAPYI work term had come to an end.

Another problem stemming from the disconnection between CAP and CAP YI contracts was the non-congruent mandates of the several funding bodies. Industry Canada, which funds CAP and administers CAP YI, sees the youth interns as merely working towards the same strategic (CAP) goals of enhancing opportunities for businesses by either enabling local businesses to go online, or by training community members on the Internet in order that they may become better electronic consumers. However, HRSDC, which is the funder for CAP YI, has as its goal the creation of work experience opportunities for young people in order to support them in their career development. In addition HRSDC has an interest in decreasing national unemployment numbers. Moreover, this latter goal is most easily accomplished by funding short-term positions at minimum wage that, though they do temporarily boost employment figures, do not tend to lead to long-term employment for the youth involved in the program or contribute substantially to the community in which the youth are employed. Dealing with these discrepancies between objectives, mandates and program cycles ended up absorbing much of the time and effort of the CAP site workers and CAP YI interns.

Networking

Community development projects like CAP are based on networks. The obvious benefits of sharing information, resources and best practices between similar organizations within a network are enhanced when many sites have the potential to speak together and support each other on the issues of universal access, and for servicing digital divide communities.

The varying, and at times conflicting, values found in the different bodies that organize, fund, and administer CAP and CAP YI, including Industry Canada, HRSDC and VCN, has had

the likely result of limiting the success of the program. The ability of VCN to realize and harness the power of the community networks which it seeks to build and sustain, has also been limited by the flawed connections between CAP and CAP YI, including the inability to retain information and the lack of continuity of projects undertaken and then given up when the funding comes to an end. These types of unresolved issues have had a negative impact on the process of community building.

Industry Canada's early vision for CAP assumed a reliance upon and development of community networks. Indeed, the CAP mandate states that:

By combining strengths, assets and resources from all their partners and participants, Community Resource Networks can address local and regional issues and concerns that they must deal with in Canada's new knowledge-based economy. These collaborative efforts are a cost-effective way to help a community access the tools and gain the skills it needs.¹⁵

There are two assumptions behind this declaration. The first is that community networks were already in existence prior to CAP, and simply needed to be tapped and augmented through the use of ICTs. The second assumption is that community networks are primarily useful as a "cost-effective" means to promote economic development. Concerning the first assumption, we found that among the large number of sites nominally included in the Lower Mainland network, many had different goals than those being assumed above, and some "communities" being relied on as "partners" did not in fact exist in such a form as is being assumed and had to be created for the purposes of the program. The second assumption overlooks the importance of the common values shared between sites, where participants came together to form networks from the ground-up around shared goals, and actions directed to meet those goals, but where these goals were somewhat beyond or outside the exclusively economic goals pointed to in the CAP mandate. In order to respond to this mandate in fact, some networks were created specifically to meet the requirements of the program. These networks were of course, "top-down" from the outset, and thus completely lacked access to local resources to support implementation of the program. The result of this was that there was the need to re-channel available resources, particularly human resources in order that the program be implemented as required even though one of the essential assumed sources of local resources was completely absent.

All of the Lower Mainland networks, whatever their type, came together in this instance specifically for the common purpose of obtaining funding from the federal government to assist in the provision of Internet access for their clients, which is to say that the network was formed in order to fit into the government policy scheme. As the CAP sites were so diverse in their services and orientations, they did not necessarily share a vision or a common purpose. Such a common purpose would have had the effect of giving them a stake in the program from the beginning, and

¹⁵ <http://www.ic.gc.ca/cmb/welcomeic.nsf/ICPages/Mandate>

would have encouraged them to be more actively involved in shaping the network to be something of sustainable value outside of CAP and Industry Canada funding requirements. That these were not self-created networks, but networks of convenience, contingent on government money limited the possibility for long-term success and sustainability from the very beginning.

The lack of cohesion between the sites in the network is partially the result of CAP having what appeared to be three different approaches over time: one emphasizing access to ICT infrastructure for economic development; a second concerned with providing access to training and skill-building for youth; and third directed toward enabling marginalized communities to become active participants in society. This only partially over-lapping and consistent set of goals translated into a lack of common understanding among the 99 sites about what their involvement in CAP could and should be.

A second reason for the weak nature of the Lower Mainland Network was the structure of the funding process itself, which had the effect of inhibiting cooperation between sites, and continuity from one year to the next. This can be seen in the basic numbers of sites involved in the Lower Mainland Network, which initially included up to 250 CAP sites, but which in response to funding restrictions and administrative decree was drastically reduced to only 99 sites within the period of one fiscal year. The result of this “slaughter of the sites” was that individual sites that wanted to participate had to, in practice, compete against each other for funding and for their very existence. Also, the CAP funding was structured in a manner which necessitated that sites were required to spend their allotted money and invoice for it in a very short period of time, (as for example over 6 weeks during the Christmas period). The result was that sites were not able to spread their funding out over the full year, or develop projects which would contribute to the community because of the uncertainty about funding deadlines, restrictions and continued support from the program.

The Downtown Eastside CAP network includes 15 sites, plus 4 additional independent sites, that are all situated within 10 city blocks of each other.¹⁶ This neighbourhood, being one of the poorest in Canada, displays the concentration of all of society's ills. The CAP sites in the Downtown Eastside were housed within a variety of community organizations, all of which are providing service to “digital divide” populations in some manner. Issues of illiteracy, drug addiction, mental illness, and homelessness are prevalent at all sites, and many of the site users are unemployed or underemployed, seniors, Aboriginals or new Canadians.

The high concentration of CAP sites in this neighbourhood was a result of the way in which Industry Canada chose which sites to fund. Drawing on census information, demographic maps were created based on average income. All sites that were located in the zones of lowest per

¹⁶ http://www.dtes.ca/index.cfm?group_id=3353

capita income were funded. No sites west of Main Street, the city's dividing line between relative poverty and affluence, were included on this list.¹⁷

As a result of the concentration of CAP sites in the Downtown Eastside, many CAP YI Youth were placed at sites in this area. Due to a failure to provide resources or incentives there was a remarkable lack of coordination between sites that were ostensibly neighbours, and that undoubtedly served the same clientele. One example of the kinds of benefits that could be achieved through such coordination was the connection that was established between the Vancouver Native Health Society Positive Outlook, a CAP site housed within a health drop-in site for people who are HIV positive and living in and around the Downtown Eastside, and Tradeworks Training Society, an organization offering job training to people re-entering the workforce from welfare dependence.

At the time, Tradeworks was also host to the reBOOT program, a national computer recycling and repair initiative¹⁸. During a site visit conducted at the Positive Outlook, it was noticed that only one computer was available for public use, and that this computer was heavily used by the site's users for such purposes as researching personal health information and keeping in touch with friends and relatives. The intern placed at the site indicated that this location was for many of the site users the only private access they had to computers and the Internet. An additional computer was desired, but the funds provided by CAP had to cover connectivity for the year, as well as human resource costs, meaning that there was not enough left over to cover the expense of a new computer. In response to this situation, it was possible to contact the intern at Tradeworks, who had taken over the administration of reBOOT who was able to assemble a computer for donation to the Positive Outlook. This was accomplished within a matter of days.

The lesson to be drawn from this example is very simple. Networks of mutual support and cooperation, be it in close geographical areas such as the Downtown Eastside or further afield such as the entire Lower Mainland Network, are not spontaneously created through the provision of technology to certain pre-selected sites meeting government identified standards. In order for such linkages to be made, interested and knowledgeable people have to be present. This linking function was provided by the CAP interns, with the assistance and guidance of the Regional Coordinators. In practice, the interns themselves became the most important and successful networking tool available to both VCN as well as the Industry Canada sponsored CAP network.

¹⁷ This way of funding sites based on the per-capita income of the neighbourhood it is in has meant that CAP sites are concentrated in often small geographic areas, like the Downtown Eastside, while more affluent neighbourhoods are ignored, despite the presence of individuals in those communities who would stand to benefit from a public access site.

¹⁸ Tradeworks lost a major source of their funding in the spring of 2005 and were forced to downsize their operations. They have since given up their large space which included a wood shop and construction area, a large warehouse for storing pallets of computers, and the reBOOT computer repair workshop, along with their classrooms and administrative offices. Tradeworks has moved to a new location still within the Downtown Eastside, though they do not provide near the level of services they used to, including reBOOT. For more information about reBOOT, see their website at <<http://www.reboot.on.ca/>>

However, this type of activity—the facilitation of inter-networking within the network—however much its value, has been left completely to the initiative of the individual interns and the other contract employees and thus fluctuates year-to-year. It cannot thus be relied on to provide a basis for creating or strengthening networks among the individual sites that are being funded.

Reporting

The reluctance of the federal government to engage in consultative processes with community networks during the formation of its Information Highway policy can be seen to be mirrored in the ineffectiveness of the reporting mechanisms which were built into CAP YI program¹⁹. Lacking useful internal feedback and evaluation procedures, the internship program has not been able to adequately adapt to the changing technological environment and the youths involved have not had a means to provide input into the on-going activities of the program, with the result that have not felt invested in nor rewarded for the “social” work that they have done in helping to bridge the digital divide. While reports were a requirement of the internship, their ability to communicate the richness of the activities (and of their experiences) of the CAP site to Industry Canada was limited to responding within the limited dimensions prescribed by the latter’s predetermined priorities and interests.

The expectation for CAP YI was basically that it would complement CAP’s technical mandate with a social training component. Based on the CAP objectives of ‘economic and social development at a community level’, the interns were encouraged to set up a website for their CAP site, assist CAP users to access government online forms, promote e-commerce for local businesses, and host ‘cybercamps’.²⁰ The forms provided for activity reporting by the interns reflected these priorities.

The top of the monthly impact report form states:

In order to help the Community Access Program (CAP) evaluate the impact of its Youth Initiative, all CAP Youth Interns are requested to provide information on the types of community clients served and the specific services provided. This report is to be completed on a monthly basis.²¹

¹⁹See Graham and Shade 1996 for a discussion of a lack of meaningful consultation with communities for the creation of federal policy.

²⁰See Community Futures, the delivery host of VCN’s CAP YI

<http://www.communityfutures.ca/bc/cap/info/scope.html#3>

²¹ <http://www.communityfutures.ca/bc/cap/info/reports.html> A cybercamp was the term used for any group based training session.

The ‘deliverables’ of the CAP YI program consisted of a *start-up report*, *monthly impact reports*, a *success story*, and a *youth report*. The reports however, were not structured in a way that allowed for open-ended responses or that provided space to write in such things as jobs done, activities accomplished, successes or setbacks. Instead it used a fill-in-the-blank format, with little opportunity to respond outside of the prescribed areas. These survey-like forms, with their lines to indicate that a specific activity was performed, did not provide means to describe work accomplished beyond the specific and narrow interests of HRDC. HRDC thus determined the information that it would receive about the program within a very narrow scope and left any other aspect of the program and the youth’s employment activities “off the radar”.

The reports could be seen as simply a quantitative compliment to the ‘success stories’ that were also required of interns. These ‘success stories’ in turn were solicited but with no associated guidelines, hence no identified expectations, and no indication how or if at all these fitted into a feedback chain upwards into the policy levels in the administration. Most often these stories ended up reporting little information about the work and impact of the interns at their CAP sites, or in their communities. More often than not, the interns had little means to conceptualize the significance of the work that they were performing or its value because the form of the ‘youth’ and ‘monthly reports’ acted so as to limit an understanding of community and economic development issues and the contributions that might be made through their work in the CAP site.

If for example, the interns introduced children to learning games on computers, or helped fill out welfare forms, or typed out the resume of someone with low literacy skills, or if they soothed someone who was paranoid about surveillance on the Internet in order that they could email an estranged family member,²² these necessary social interactions and training were denied significance and thus ‘legitimacy’ through the failure of the reporting mechanisms both formal and informal to provide a means for identifying and communicating these as activities undertaken. As well, without mechanisms being in place to capture this frontline knowledge, best practices were lost, and the possibility for continuity in successful initiatives was disrupted.

In order to fill in these knowledge gaps, as a way of obtaining feedback to support program improvement, and as a means to ensure accountability (and acknowledgement) concerning the performance of the interns a further reporting requirement for interns was instituted at VCN. These were (web)blogs to be completed after each shift, weekly timesheets, monthly meetings, and additional success stories. The blog was an individual space where information and experiences could be posted for other interns to learn from, as well as an opportunity for developing design and communications skills.

Monthly meetings were established so as to provide opportunities for intern-to-intern training sessions, informal interaction between the interns, and a roundtable where CAP sites

²² These are all anecdotal stories from the different interns. Though encouraged, few of these stories ever made these into a coherent report to Industry Canada, nor even to VCN.

were described, as well as to discuss the work done, the problems encountered, and successes achieved. Often at these meetings, challenges at one site were responded to by the provision of resources from another site or by another intern's knowledge and skill. In this way the CAP sites were networked and projects collaboratively initiated. All of this was, of course, outside of the formally identified program activities or deliverables of either federal funding agency²³.

From these two approaches to reporting – that of the federal program and that implemented by the field managers from VCN, different priorities and understanding of communication processes could be seen. VCN seems to understand that feedback in terms of program implementation and growth requires knowledge from those that are active in the CAP sites and in the community. This is particularly true of work being done in the technology field where there are continuing and rapid changes. It is also an approach that gives priority to the 'effective use' of technology over that of simple 'access' to technology. As Gurstein states, "The opportunity for defining and developing strategies for 'effective use' should become a dialogue between those responding to the perceived inequalities of the DD [digital divide] and end users who understand most clearly what applications or uses would be most beneficial in particular local contexts" (Gurstein, 2003: 14). Without this 'dialogue', in this case undertaken through the reporting mechanisms, the programs are unable to address the issues that are of most significance in specific local contexts—that is, those who are on the other side of the digital divide have little means to influence the activities and programs which are meant to lessen those inequalities.

Making CAPYI Effective and Strategic: Linking networking and reporting

The experience with implementing and administering CAP and CAP YI through VCN has highlighted the importance of networking and reporting as the vital links for communication between loosely affiliated and ill-coordinated organizational structures such as the Lower Mainland Network. As was noted in a contribution to a final report from the Regional Coordinators submitted to Industry Canada, "reporting is networking and networking requires reporting".²⁴ Reporting can complement and strengthen networks through the sharing of best practices, resource manuals, skills and general know-how of the individual members and users. This information sharing can also lead to a more permanent linkage of the sites by creating networks around commonly agreed upon goals, such as universal access or online databases.

²³However, it was commonly known to all that these were not demanded by the CAP and CAP YI program itself, and in many ways not taken as seriously. The schism between the mandates of VCN and CAP YI and the needs of the CAP site were never adequately addressed, and in a sense, led to confusion on all parts as there were three levels of reporting required and only a minimum wage attached to all of this work

²⁴ It should be noted that this was the first year that RCs and the two Provincial Coordinators jointly created and submitted a report to Industry Canada, from their unique position of witnesses to the programs successes and failures. Recommendations that we submitted to this report are reflected in this paper. It should further be noted that the RC report sucked. It was watered down and did not adequately represent our experiences as an urban CAP network which was not solely focused on economic development or youth training and employment gaining. As we have stated, the DTES is not really about prosperity.

These long-term social goals extend beyond economic considerations and can allow for the meaningful participation and inclusion of organizations by cementing relationships between people and groups who are moving towards a shared vision of a just society.

This collective participation in societal change is a strong motivation to stay within and be invested in a network which can to be a tool to this end. The link between networking and reporting, has been identified as a necessary means for building network strength through communication.

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