

Communications

Developing a communications framework for social and economic inclusion

Job searches, EI applications, passport renewals, airline tickets, and banking are a few of the thousands of common activities that are increasingly carried out on-line. Even the current H1N1 flu vaccine clinics have relied heavily on electronic communications to manage their wait times, reducing them dramatically by continuously updating their status to websites and social networks. High-speed Internet connections have become an integral part of modern life.

Yet government policymakers seem unable to meet the challenge presented by this new phenomenon. In the recent Berkman Center study of broadband policies around the world, Canada ranks 22nd overall, 16th in access, 20th in speed, and 25th in price.¹ This is just the most recent of many international studies exposing the effects of Canada's failure to modernize its legislative and regulatory communications framework. At stake is nothing less than the economic and social health of our communities.

Recognizing "effective" connectivity as a legal right

The Berkman Center study recognized broadband "as a key enabler of economic growth that can benefit services such as telemedicine in rural areas, allow better management of transportation and energy systems, and reduce infrastructure costs for businesses."² Especially in the current economic downturn, communities need such an enabler.

Unfortunately, remedial programs have taken baby steps when giant steps are needed to catch up in the field of communications. In 2009, the government allocated \$225 million over three years to encourage the development of rural broadband infrastructure.³ The program defines broadband connectivity as "access to Internet service that supports data transmission at a minimum speed of 1.5 Mbps to a household."⁴ 1.5 Mbps. is not enough to support applications such as e-health or e-education or e-commerce. At this speed, rural and some urban Canadians will remain effectively disconnected and disabled for a long time to come.

Estonia (2004), Australia (2006), and Finland (2009) have acknowledged that broadband has

become an essential service. They have declared broadband Internet access to be a legal right.⁵ The AFB declares that Canadians, too, should not only have a legal right to broadband service but also that such service must be robust enough to support social and economic applications essential to community sustainability.

- The AFB will make access to “effective” bandwidth that supports a wide range of communications applications a legal right for all Canadians.

Talking to Canadians:

Developing a national strategy

Countries ranking high in the Saïd study of connectivity around the world (South Korea, Japan, Sweden) had developed a national broadband agenda.⁶ A brief glance at the broadband planning activity in some of our peer nations indicates just how far we have fallen behind:

- Australia released its National Broadband Strategy in 2004. It recognized, as a top priority, the need to improve infrastructure across the country.
- Over the past year, Great Britain has involved its citizens in planning for their digital future and in June, 2009, released the Digital Britain Report.
- Germany released its Information Society Germany 2010 plan in 2006.
- France and New Zealand announced national digital strategies in 2008.
- The U.S. Federal Communications Commission (FCC) was scheduled to present a national broadband strategy to the U.S. Congress early this year.

In Canada, in 2005, the then Liberal government established a three-person panel to make recommendations on how to move toward a modern telecommunications framework. The

panel held two public meetings, one in Ottawa focusing on industry perspectives, another in Whitehorse focusing on public interest issues. Although well attended by local public interest advocates, the Whitehorse venue was inaccessible to many others. Of the many written submissions received by the panel, only 15% came from Aboriginal, consumer, women’s, and community groups.⁷ It is no surprise then, that The Telecom Policy Review Panel Report⁸ reflected “a much narrower vision of the role and value of telecommunications in Canadian society than that held by many Canadians,” as pointed out by Philippa Lawson, former director of the Canadian Internet Policy and Public Interest Clinic.⁹

Urgent calls for action are coming from all sectors of society. Even the CRTC, in its 2009 New Media decision, pointed out the need for a comprehensive national strategy to secure the nation’s digital future. “Such a strategy is essential if we want to maintain a competitive advantage in this global environment,” said CRTC chairman Konrad von Finckenstein.¹⁰

The AFB will begin developing a national communications strategy immediately. The purpose of such a strategy will be to design a national framework advancing the development and use of broadband — a framework that fully sustains open competition for all levels of Internet services.

The process will take the form of open and accessible consultations that will go beyond business and academia. This consultation will be led by a panel of independent researchers, who will lead citizen fora across the country and receive written submissions. The fora will explore a wide range of communications policy issues, from copyright to the infrastructure required to operate the national network on an open access basis.

A report outlining an integrated national communications strategy will be submitted in 2011.

- The AFB allocates \$750,000 to fund a broad national consultation to modernize communications policy in Canada.
- The AFB allocates \$40 million to support new and existing national public access sites.

Building capacity and generating demand with a national public access program

The Berkman Centre study also notes that national programs providing access, education, and support to ensure effective use of ICTs in communities are considered essential in countries like Korea that rank high in their use of on-line tools. Such programs are considered investments, both generating demand and building human capacity to meet that demand.¹¹

Canada currently has a national network of 3,500 community technology centres that help more than 100,000 people per day¹² to incorporate new technologies into their lives. These sites and their young facilitators, along with a legion of volunteers, provide job search and software training, technology literacy programs, access to community services, and cultural integration opportunities. They partner with the local private and public sector to provide services and experienced personnel in many different areas, from film editing to website building. Along the way, thousands of youth gain valuable job experience.

Both internal and external evaluators have agreed that this very cost-effective program has been a success story for years.¹³ The AFB will not allow this network to collapse in the current telecom policy vacuum. Support for existing centres will be expanded and a program to restart funding for new centres will be established.

This investment will boost the local economy by encouraging the uses of technology for community development and by offering collaborative tools that promote the effectiveness of the community sector. With so many communities in distress due to major job losses, these programs provide essential support in this economic downturn.

Looking down the road:

Next generation broadband

The 2006 report of the Telecom Policy Review Panel noted that Canada was “among the first countries to recognize the potential for information and communications technologies (ICTs) to transform and enrich economic and social life.”¹⁴

However, Canada’s rapidly declining telecommunications infrastructure has now become a major concern for small and large business, the R&D sector, the education sector, and the social sector alike. “Broadband speed is an important driver for useful connectivity, since it facilitates the flow of information, stimulates innovation, encourages education, [and] increases productivity and economic prosperity,” says a recent report from the Canadian Chamber of Commerce.¹⁵

According to telecom analyst Sheridan Scott, “A 2009 study by the World Bank suggests that an increase of 10% in broadband penetration in high-income countries correlates with GDP growth increases of 1.2%.”¹⁶ The Canadian economy needs strategic investment in more than roads and bridges to exploit the potential of the new communications tools.

In April, 2009, the government of Australia announced it would build a national high-speed broadband network that would deliver up to 100Mbps to 90% of its citizens. The eight-year, AU\$43 billion project will be one of the largest state-sponsored Internet infrastructure upgrades in the world. The Australian Prime Minister has suggested that the project will support up to 37,000 jobs at the peak of construction.¹⁷

This is the kind of program that will be necessary if Canada is to bring its communications infrastructure back up to world-class standards. Starting in 2011–12, and over a period of 10 years, the AFB will invest \$2 billion per year in a pan-

Canadian infrastructure project to make world-class broadband a reality for most Canadians. In this undertaking, the AFB will be guided by the recommendations of the National Communications Strategy. Given such a major commitment of public funds, we will ensure that Canadians retain majority ownership of the resulting infrastructure.

2010 budget for communications:

1. \$750,000: To fund a broad national consultation to modernize communications policy in Canada.
2. \$40 million a year: To support new and existing National Public Access sites.
3. \$2 billion a year for 10 years on broadband infrastructure.

Notes

- 1 Berkman Center for Internet and Society. (2009). *Next Generation Connectivity: A review of broadband Internet transitions and policy from around the world*. Harvard University, October (draft). p. 112. http://www.fcc.gov/stage/pdf/Berkman_Center_Broadband_Study_13Oct09.pdf
- 2 Nowak, Peter. (2009). "Canadian broadband blasted by Harvard study." CBC News, Oct. 15. <http://www.cbc.ca/technology/story/2009/10/15/harvard-fcc-broadband-study.html>
- 3 Prime Minister of Canada. (2009). "PM announces major improvement to broadband internet access in rural Canada." Ottawa: News release, July 30. <http://pm.gc.ca/eng/media.asp?category=1&id=2702>
- 4 Industry Canada. (2009). "Broadband Canada: Connecting Rural Canadians. Frequently Asked Questions." Last modified Sept. 22. http://www.ic.gc.ca/eic/site/719.nsf/eng/h_00004.html#BPQ3
- 5 Estonia added this to their constitution in 2004. The Finnish government has announced that, as of 2010, all citizens will have the right to a free Internet connection at a min. speed of 1 megabits/sec with the intention of boosting that to 100 Mbps by 2015. Guillaume Champeau. « La Finlande fait de l'accès au haut-débit un droit fondamental et opposable. » *Numerama*. Oct. 14, 2009. [debit-un-droit-fondamental-et-opposable.html. In 2006, the Australian government announced the Broadband Guarantee, an intention that was ratified in March 2007.](http://www.numerama.com/magazine/14231-la-finlande-fait-de-l-acces-au-haut-</div><div data-bbox=)

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8 Telecommunications Policy Review Panel. (2006). *Final Report*. Ottawa, March. http://www.telecomreview.ca/eic/site/tprp-gecrt.nsf/eng/h_rx00054.html

9 Lawson, Philippa. (2008). "Gutting the Telecom Act," in Moll, Marita and Leslie Regan Shade (eds). *For Sale to the Highest Bidder: Telecom Policy in Canada*. Ottawa, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives.

10 Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC). (2009) "CRTC extends exemption for new media and calls for a national digital strategy." News release, June 4. <http://www.crtc.gc.ca/eng/news/RELEASES/2009/ro90604.htm>

11 Berkman Center. (2009). http://www.fcc.gov/stage/pdf/Berkman_Center_Broadband_Study_13Oct09.pdf

12 This network was built under the Industry Canada Community Access Program (CAP) and its companion Youth Initiative Program (CAP-YI). *Telecommunications Policy Review Panel. (2006) Final Report*. Chapter 8. Industry Canada. <http://www.telecomreview.ca/epic/site/tprp-gecrt.nsf/en/rx00055e.html>

13 See, for example: Ekos Research Associates. (2004). *Evaluation Study of the Community Access Program (CAP)*. Industry Canada. Audit and Evaluation Branch, January 16. <http://www.ic.gc.ca/epic/site/ic1.nsf/en/01420e.html> and Coleman, Ronald. (2002). "Economic value of CAP sites as investments in social capital" and "Impact of CAP sites on volunteerism." GPI Atlantic. <http://www.gpiatlantic.org/publications/abstracts/econvalue-cap-ab.htm>

14 Telecommunications Policy Review Panel. (2006). <http://www.telecomreview.ca/eic/site/tprp-gecrt.nsf/eng/rx00062.html#T6>

15 Canadian Chamber of Commerce. (2009). "Mapping the future of the digital economy: Key to Canada's economic success." June 22. http://www.chamber.ca/images/uploads/Reports/ICT_Digital_Economy22-06-09.pdf

16 Scott, Sheridan. (2009). "Get ready, CRTC, digital economy is coming." *Globe and Mail*. Nov.2. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/technology/get-ready-crtc-digital-economy-is-coming/article1347786/>

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