**The rise and fall of community network support in British Columbia**

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*“I also see a time when community networks will span the province creating a Free Trade Zone in data that puts control of telecommunications in the people’s hands. …. The community will ultimately own the networks.”*

**Jeff Roberts. CMON**. July 2004

On the one hand, Canadians are facing the distributed complex adaptive systems of global digital society. On the other hand, they are facing the collapse of Canada’s traditional institutions for dialogue on public policy. This creates two diverging themes in the Canadian story about our transition to a digital society:

1. Locally, communities are failing to find altered means and necessity to control their own socio-economic and political development.

2. Nationally and provincially, governments are abandoning responsibility to regulate in the public interest in favour of a path of least resistance - self-regulation via market-based approaches.

The trend, for the present moment and the foreseeable future, is toward outsourcing local governance to the Chamber of Commerce and national governance to corporate monopoly.

Although their efforts remain unfocused, there are many people who still hold fast to a belief in the efficacy and utility of using ICTs for community development. They still believe that looking at how local community changes by being online is the best route to understanding what makes up the structure of digital society. But, in the face of active political opposition, it’s a faith that’s getting harder and harder to sustain. Whenever they can, they have been advocating a constant theme, that community, and therefore community development, is an essential structural element of digital society.

Their participation in national policy forums has included:

* Information Highway Advisory Councils
* Smart Communities
* Broadband initiative
* Telecommunications Policy Review Panel
* National Digital Economy Strategy

….. with zero impact on public policy. Why?

…. Now we must act to increase public awareness of network neutrality, the digital divide, digital inclusion, and the uses of ICTs for community development as significant issues of public policy. But, in the face of colossal indifference, how?

My own conclusion is that the political agenda inherent in digital economy strategies is not about adapting to the changes that digital society represents. It’s about avoiding the impact of those changes on existing institutions as long as possible. At the political level, no one is openly asking, “In an Internet Economy, what kind of society do we want?”

**BC experiments in capacity for change via the uses of ICTs for community development – what drove their practices and motivated their intentions?**

The history of community networking support in BC provides a case study of how elements of strategy emerge that don’t take communities where they need to go. BC starts with a community-based focus on the use of the Internet for development. Then that slowly disappears.

1992 = community networks = first email experience …Victoria Fee-Net and Vancouver Community Network, first as access to the Internet, then “digital inclusion.”

**Victoria Free-Net association** (VIFA) represents the view of a non-profit community-based ISP that is struggling because of an inability to gain support for a critical issue – how what was once imagined as merely a “digital divide” problem of access to a technology has become a socio-economic development problem of the community’s capacity to both address digital inclusion and to control its own socio-economic development.

**British Columbia Community Networks Association** (BCCNA) a non-profit society formed in 1993 to support the development of Community Computer Networks in British Columbia. <[**http://hp.bccna.bc.ca/**](http://hp.bccna.bc.ca/)**>** Later, BCCNA becomes PCNA.

**Pacific Community Networks Association (PCNA) <http://www.pcna.ca/>**

PCNA went from a BC based Free-Net organization to being actively involved with many agencies in BC and the Yukon that work with all aspects of community ICT. PCNA’s mandate is to provide urban and rural communities with opportunities to explore the effective use of information and communications technologies in learning, capacitybuilding, and economic development. It has also worked closely with the First Nations Technology Council. It, like the FreeNets, has worked with and benefited from two Federal Programs oriented to community development:

* CAP (Community Access Project), an Industry Canada initiative started in 1995 and now sun setting. PCNA has been a provider of technical services to CAP sites and their clients.
* CLN (Community Learning Networks) was an initiative, launched late in 1998 and now long sunset, of the Office of Learning Technologies, Human Resources Development Canada. The Office of Learning Technologies adopted a working definition of them as "community- controlled structures and systems aimed at furthering community development and enhancing the lives of their constituencies by supporting and encouraging lifelong learning."

**British Columbia Internet Association (BCIA)** was a non-profit society representing the interests of the Internet industry in British Columbia, active up until 2002. **It supported** “the development of a knowledge-based communications infrastructure in British Columbia that could provide advice and guidance to government on the development and implementation of Internet services in BC; and provide assistance and support to groups involved in the use, operation and evolution of Internet services.”

In 1995, largely through the efforts of these organizations nobody was in any doubt about the centrality of community to structural change in BC through ICT use. That led to the Electronic Highway Accord.

**The Electronic Highway Accord:** Securing British Columbia's On-ramp to the Electronic Highway, August 1995.

<http://www.vcn.bc.ca/bcla-ip/governments/accord2.html>

The Electronic Highway Accord results from deliberations with representatives of industry, labour, education, research, government and community groups. It represented the collective efforts of a significant number of individuals and organizations to develop a shared vision for British Columbians “as we strive, together,” to take full advantage of the electronic highway. This "highway" is a network of networks resulting from the convergence of computing and communications technologies. For those who connect to the highway, it will enhance their ability to communicate with one another, to access and share information of all kinds, to get services, and to develop and deliver services electronically. Telecommunications has become, as basic an element of Canada's infrastructure as roads, rail, flight and other fundamental services.

This vision statement reflects a number of fundamental characteristics that must be built into the development of the Electronic Highway in British Columbia for the vision to become reality. These are:

* **The best environment for the participation of communities in the information society:** Community networks and public points of access are fundamental to affordable electronic access to services and broad community participation in the information society. A continuing commitment to involving the public in developing the electronic highway is essential.
* **The best opportunities for BC residents to participate in the information society:** Participation depends on having affordable infrastructure in place, and on the ability of organizations, individuals and businesses to be involved. This characteristic underlines the importance of the community, its businesses and public institutions, assisting, training, promoting and creating opportunities for individuals and groups taking into account particular circumstances and needs.

But it’s in the Accord where a theme first appears that comes to dominate public policy on the digital economy and broadband:

“The government is recommended to use its purchasing power as a lever, ensuring that as a condition for attaining lucrative government contracts, companies address a range of economic and social concerns. Under such arrangements, successful bidders on Requests for Proposals (RFPs) would be required to provide a full range of service. They would not be allowed to relinquish their responsibility to meet the needs of customers in high cost, low revenue areas.”

**Sid Shniad. Telecommunications Workers Union.** Review of Canadian Telecommunications Policy in the Context of Global Trade Developments

This theme is aimed directly at Telus. It’s picked up by the Premier’s Technology Council and then implemented by Network BC under the **Connecting Communities Agreement.**

**Premier's Technology Council (PTC)**

In August 2001, Premier Gordon Campbell appointed the Premier's Technology Council, comprised of 23 members from the private sector and academia. The mandate of the council is to provide advice to the Premier on all technology-related issues facing British Columbia and its citizens. In other words, rather than follow the broad based participatory methods that led to the Accord, he picked a group of technologists to solve a socio-economic development problem.

Their **first report** was published in November 2001. It identified strategies to identify the digital divide that existed in BC and to suggest ways to bridge it. They particularly focused on identifying root causes for the digital divide, which they saw as the gap between those communities and people who can access the Internet and those who cannot. They had noted that those areas with high population density were connected, but most B.C. communities did not have access to broadband services.

Their **second report** was released in April 2002. It listed recommendations for improving broadband infrastructure and increasing public access to the Internet. They saw the digital divide as a matter of physical access and individual “opportunity,” not community development, … as removing barriers that kept many British Columbians from participating in the knowledge-based economy and from accessing the educational, social, and cultural benefits delivered through broadband networks. From the beginning, they assumed that the private sector would build and run the broadband infrastructure, and that the most cost effective way to bridge the digital divide would be through leveraging of public sector demand for network services. They don’t acknowledge the relevance of broadband for achieving self-determined community development.

To help create a “**knowledge based society**,” the PTC made recommendations in three key areas:

1. Infrastructure for a Knowledge-Based Society: BC should endeavour to ensure that the technology infrastructure is in place to support the economic, cultural and social growth of people in BC. This includes broadband communications, connected education systems, high speed research networks, health networks, research centres, and university facilities.
2. Government Services for a Knowledge-Based Society: BC must utilize technology to improve government service delivery. This includes seamless service delivery across government organizations, K-12 and post secondary e-learning, e-health, and Gov 2.0.
3. The Knowledge-Based Economy: BC must put programs in place that enhance the knowledge-based industry to strengthen and diversify the BC economy. This includes creating a supportive environment for business promoting the availability of capital, helping attract and develop skilled human resources, and investing in research and commercialization.

Gordon Campbell didn’t ask society how to change society. He asked elite representatives of the very institutions threatened by the Internet’s structural implications.

**British Columbia Community Connectivity Co-operative**

In March of 2004, BC3 was registered as a non-profit co-operative with the BC government under the name British Columbia Community Connectivity Co-operative

It’s to be anon-profit community-based broadband capacity-building organization, and to make a sustainable business case for a structure of community-based open access networks.

BC3 recognized that the “product” is socio-economic development, not network technology.

BC3’s most significant achievement was proving the evidence of the need to address the digital divide that the Premier’s Technology Council had identified, thus paving the route to the Connecting Communities Agreement. But the most curious factor in the whole story of BC3 is that the Government of BC did provide communities with the means to make their case. Although I do believe that the full funding of BC3’s formation was the result of personal initiative by John Webb and Matt Wenger

**Connecting Communities Agreement**

In April 2005, the Government of B.C., TELUS, and local health regions, schools and crown corporations delivered the first of its kind agreement to bridge the digital divide by connecting communities, and creating new health care, education, and economic development opportunities in the province. In 2008, the Connecting Communities Agreement (CCA) was extended for two years to ensure that Internet Service Providers accessing services under the Agreement could continue to access affordable, high speed service.

Building on the original Connecting Communities Agreement, and following a three-year negotiated request for proposals process, the Government of BC awarded TELUS a 10-year telecommunications services contract, signed July 29, 2011. It provides telecommunications and strategic services to government and its broader public sector partners, including long distance, conferencing, voice, data, cellular and strategic services.  The customers represented are the core ministries of the government, the six B.C. health authorities, BC Hydro, WorkSafeBC, the Insurance Corporation of BC and BC Lottery Corporation.

TELUS fully funds the infrastructure related to implementation of these agreements in return for the revenue from providing government network operation.

**Connecting British Columbia Agreement** with TELUS – As part of the 10-year strategic telecommunications contract signed in July 2011, TELUS agreed to provide the following rural benefits at no additional cost to the taxpayer:

* Work toward increasing Internet connectivity across B.C. to 97 per cent of the province, by increasing Internet bandwidth connections for designated rural and remote communities
* Maintain service to designated communities through Internet gateways, which enable local Internet service providers to offer services to citizens and businesses.
* Provide over 1,700 km of new cellular coverage along previously unconnected highway segments within five years to improve public safety.
* Increase Internet speeds or bandwidth by up to tenfold in many previously connected areas.
* Upgrade up to 450 schools with high-speed fibre optic cables over the next 10 years to enable faster access to information for young learners.

The Government of BC believed that the approach to bringing broadband to unserved communities represented by the Connecting Communities Agreement was successful in meeting its primary objectives. But it did not believe it would be an effective model for reaching the remaining unserved communities. In the interests of further refining public private partnerships for the outsourcing of government ICT use, they drew back from a collaborative community-based approach and withdrew their funding support for BC3. They are making the assumption that there is a lack of capacity resident in small communities to own and operate networks in the longer term.

The existence of such an assumption clearly telegraphs risks for the future of an ISP industry of SMEs oriented to serving locally owned networks. But the 2011 agreement delays that competition between Telus and local ISPs for a further 10 years.

In spite of making comments about the importance of the “community piece,” Network BC has still come to a negative conclusion. While they accepted that the “BC3 model” of a cooperative approach to aggregating and responding to network access needs in remote communities was successful in building networks, they felt that it is not sustainable in their continuing operation. They believed that the capacity to run or fix the “front end” without access to hired help just isn’t there. “If you don’t address the profitability, you can’t address that operations step, the need to hire somebody to do the work.”

**Local Internet Service Providers** (ISPs) – This key segment of B.C.’s telecommunications sector ensures that high-speed Internet access leveraged by the Province under the TELUS/BC partnership (Connecting British Columbia Agreement) translates into services accessed and purchased by citizens living in rural and remote areas. In B.C., more than 150 small and medium-sized local ISPs work to keep citizens and businesses connected to the world, which benefits the economy, health, education and enhances public safety. Dialogue with local and regional ISPs is an important part in creating strategies to bridge the digital divide. For example, the Connecting Citizens Grant Program was designed to eliminate barriers to service expansion identified through dialogue with local ISPs.

For the next ten years, because of a political priority to downsize government by outsourcing network services for the electronic delivery of government services, Telus now owns essential components of BC capacity to address the uses of ICTs for development – community development online. Bottom line is that Telus now dominates the transport channels for the networked delivery of government services. Long term, the question I think needs to be asked is – do we want them to dominate governance? Who elected them?

We had the means for community-based dialogue with government about the uses of ICTs for community development and we lost it. There are, however, two channels where capacity for dialogue still exists – FNTC and BCBA.

**Pathways to Technology** < <http://www.pathwaystotechnology.ca/home>>

In January 2006 the First Nations Technology Council (FNTC) articulated the high priority placed on broadband connectivity in a document entitled "2006-2008 Strategic Plan Supporting the Full Integration of Technologies to Improve the Quality of Life of all First Nations in British Columbia.” The Plan recognizes connectivity as foundational to closing the socio-economic gap between First Nations and other British Columbians.

In January 2009, this plan attracted a $40.8 million federal and provincial investment to connect First Nations Communities to the Internet, led by the Pathways to Technology Project Steering Committee, including:

* **All Nations Trust Company**: ANTCO is an Aboriginal Financial Institution incorporated as a trust company and operating in BC since November 1987. ANTCO has 183 shareholders comprised of Aboriginal bands, tribal councils, corporations, organizations and individuals in BC.
* **First Nations Technology Council**: FNTC is a society, incorporated under the Society Act (BC) mandated to serve and assist First Nations in BC in their achievement of: industrial grade connectivity; increased technical capacity; the development of technical support; and the revitalization of culture and languages using technology.
* **First Nations Health Council**: The role of the Health Council is to serve as the advocacy voice for First Nations on health-related matters; to support all First Nations in achieving their health priorities, objectives and initiatives through implementation of a variety of health plans and accords.

The steering committee also includes a number of advisory members: the First Nations Leadership Council, Health Canada, the Ministry of Labour and Citizens’ Services (Network BC) and the Ministry of Aboriginal Relations & Reconciliation.

ANTCO also provides project management and financial expertise.  ANTCO has contracted with TELUS, NorthwesTel and other private telecommunications providers to deliver the necessary infrastructure and expertise.

The $40.8M is split into two distinct yet related funds:

* $35.8M for the construction of the broadband infrastructure network
* $5M for capacity building, delivered by the First Nations Technology Council, to provide training and support programs. This will help provide communities and new users with the online technical skills needed to capitalize on the full benefits of the Internet.

To date, 157 of 203 First Nations communities have some Internet access.  Over the next three to five years, the Pathways to Technology project expects to connect or enhance connectivity to more than 50 remote First Nations communities that currently have no or only limited service.

**BC Broadband Association**, an “Industry Association” launched in June 2008. It’s intended to inform its members on emerging issues, and to “protect” their interests. In it’s launch, Bob Allan noted that, “Small companies are the engine of innovation in the technology business sector in this Province. They need a united voice and a level playing field.” They see that Municipal broadband has suddenly become an effective playing field for addressing the importance of these issues and their complete absence in provincial and federal dialogue on public policy. They have said, “achieving wide spread municipal ownership of broadband networks as “open” and neutral channels of transportation creates the opportunity for many new markets for their services, and for many innovations in new business models to emerge in the ‘application layer’ of Internet use.”

Because of their need for access to open and neutral network platforms, the formation of a BC Broadband Association as an advocate for the interests of SMEs in the ICT industries sector can become an effective and essential ally in addressing local control of the uses of the Internet for development. The Association recognizes a need to act collaboratively with other organizations and deserves their support.

Its members have been key players in helping to address the digital divide through the Network BC Connecting Communities Agreement. They have said, “We’re the people who build the networks and keep them running. We’re what BC needs to continue to grow an industry.”

Network BC needs and therefore funds BCBA as the other side of its need for “dialogue with local ISPs.”

Here are examples of spaces where new forms of thinking may emerge:

* There could be a tipping point where citizens become aware of their need to defend their potential as online producers, forcing primary carriers to re-think plans to invest in broadband infrastructure.
* Canada’s youth may ultimately begin to exert their influence on e-development policies. Canada’s youth are well connected, non-ideological, and repelled by conventional political processes. Not perceiving a problem for themselves, they are unlikely to notice the absence of a national capacity for thinking about e-development policy. But they are very sophisticated in the politics of distributed social organization in networked communities.
* Relatively slow productivity growth compared to countries (particularly Canada’s neighbor, USA) with high levels of ICT investment and use could be viewed as a crisis, causing greater reflection on the role of the Internet as a driver of increased productivity.
* Programs that address a transition to green infrastructure such as smart energy grids have an inherent capacity to heighten understanding of Internet Protocol’s significance and the significance of local ownership of open fibre networks as a public utility and citizen ownership of the last mile.
* Canada has yet to have its first Internet election. When it does, a better understanding of e-governance could emerge, first at the local political level, where a shift to cooperative actions that use the Internet to bridge special interests gets you elected.
* Growing municipal concern for ownership of open networks as public utilities may influence the provinces to request greater support for broadband as essential infrastructure. That could shift the policy focus from national communications sector’s demands, towards citizens’ needs.
* Given the Province of Quebec’s greater comfort with discussion of social policy issues, the role of digital inclusion in Quebec politics is likely to grow. The experience gained through actions on public policy that occur as a consequence of that debate may translate to the national level. The Quebec’ “manifesto” for a digital framework calls for developing national and provincial digital strategies and for participatory development of a digital economy.
* The emergence of Web2 or “cloud-based” approaches to collaboration on program and social services delivery among community-based non-government organizations.

The sum of the impact of all of these factors should be significant. I used to believe that the state of denial in political decision making couldn’t continue for long. I was wrong about that. Instead the politics of fear and polarization is intensifying.

The better question would be, “How can the community use broadband to sustain itself?” The best example of the utility of shifting the problem definition in that way remains the success of BC First Nations in using ownership of broadband for local control of development decision-making and cultural survival.

I live in View Royal, and my own community is unconsciously facing exactly the same question, but with far less capacity to transform itself.

So far, Jeff Roberts was wrong. In Canada and I BC, the community ultimately will not own the networks, not unless there a radical shift in public expectations. But it remains my own opinion that societies that recognize the importance of community in the structure of a digital economy will do far better at adapting to it than those who do not.