Community Networks and Canadian Public Policy: Preliminary Report on the CRACIN Survey of Community Networks

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DRAFT
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## Available separately:

Appendix A: Relevant survey activity inside and outside the CRACIN project  
Appendix B: Survey poster  
Appendix C: Administrator and user information and consent forms  
Appendix D: Administrators survey  
Appendix E: Users survey
1. Community networks and the Canadian policy landscape

Introduced in September 1997, the Connecting Canadians agenda had "a stated goal to make Canada the most connected nation in the world -- to make Canada a world leader in developing and using an advanced information infrastructure to achieve our social and economic goals in the knowledge economy” (Manley, 1999). It was a wide ranging initiative that included made-in-Canada on-line access programs like SchoolNet, the Community Access Program (CAP), VolNet and Smart Communities as well as e-commerce, Canadian content and government on-line projects.

CAP was one of the cornerstones of this initiative. Initially introduced in 1995, it is described as a program to “help provide Canadians with affordable access to the Internet and the services and tools it provides. The program’s goal was to have all Canadians and communities participate fully in the knowledge-based economy. CAP sites are located in schools, libraries, community centres and friendship centres and operate through partnerships with provincial/territorial governments and non-profit organizations.” (Industry Canada, 2005a). Industry Canada documents peg the cost of the CAP program between 1995-96 and 2006 as $337,200,000 (2005a) -- a relatively modest sum of money dedicated to some very lofty goals. A companion program, the CAP Youth Initiative (CAP-YI), funded through Human Resources and Social Development Canada, provides paid work experience to youth. Together with the assistance of thousands of volunteers, they help support the CAP sites so communities can bring all its members -- including immigrants, seniors, youth, First Nations and the socially and economically challenged -- up to date with new communications tools.

In the 1997 Liberal Party policy platform, CAP was presented as a community economic development (CED) initiative: “The rapid changes taking place in information technologies present new opportunities to individuals and communities for learning, interaction, and economic development. Business and local development possibilities are becoming less dependent on location and more reliant on access to information technologies” (Liberal Party, 1997:41). The platform promises that all rural communities with populations between 400 and 50,000 people will be connected to the Internet by the year 2000.

Within two years, the goals associated with Connecting Canadians and CAP had moved well beyond the idea of connectivity as access and infrastructure to support CED to the idea of connectivity as a vehicle for social cohesion. According to then Industry Minister John Manley “Connectedness is about our vision of the Canadian society we want in the 21st century -- one with a strong, dynamic, competitive economy, and a strong lifelong-learning culture, but also one that uses connectedness to promote social cohesion, cultural expression and to build new linkages between citizens and government (Manley, 1999)”. Whatever the rationale presented, CAP was clearly set up as a community capacity building project, a multi-faceted, grassroots driven, nation building project. However, it
was rather uncomfortably settled in a department better known for more clearly defined short term infrastructure projects.

Now, in 2007, the “Connecting Canadians” initiative has been largely disbanded. While the CAP program is still alive, it has suffered major budget cuts in recent years, from $25 million in 2004-5 to approximately $9 million in 2007. Once encompassing 8,800 sites across Canada (Industry Canada, 2005a), the remaining number of active sites is 3786 (Industry Canada, 2005b). Every year, program renewal seems to hang upon a slim thread. In 2007, the program ended on April 1 and was not formally renewed until June 6, leaving CAP site administrators, volunteers and users across the country in the lurch for 9 weeks. Now, in the summer of 2007, CAP is once again “under review” with the current government looking to refocus the program. Where it will land next is anyone’s guess.

Statements by then Industry Minister John Manley indicate that the CAP program was supposed to promote community connections that lead to social cohesion and community economic development. But measuring that was another matter. Researchers are only beginning to document the many ways in which communities using new technologies are experiencing change. The SSHRC funded Canadian Research Alliance for Community Innovation and Networking (CRACIN) is a unique research project studying the impact of community-based technologies. The objective of the CRACIN project as a whole and the survey in particular was to observe and document the state of this community networking infrastructure in Canada at the beginning of the 21st century. The CRACIN survey of Canadian community networks was implemented towards the end of the project and connections between other research already completed under this umbrella and the survey results are made where possible. Although the CRACIN project formally ends in October 2007, it is hoped that there will be enough interest in early survey results to generate some resources to continue the survey until the end of 2008.

2. The importance of micro-data in public policy decision-making

Writing on the subject of documenting social capital, Jeff Frank of the Policy Research Institute notes that: “Early indications suggest a need for micro-level data that existing sources cannot provide. By this we mean detailed information on the nature and extent of personal networks, their characteristics and the resources accessed through these contacts….. It may also be important to collect thematically targeted information, either for specific populations (e.g. youth, recent immigrants, Aboriginal peoples) or for particular policy domains (e.g., labour market, health, justice)” (Frank, 2003: 71).

The CRACIN survey of administrators and users of community networks is designed to collect this type of information with the objective of informing policy domains such as community economic development, social development and communications. Questions are designed to explore how public investment in community technology is impacting local learning and social activities; how users are using the services and why; what kinds of services are most important; and how these services interact at the community level.
We believe that this will provide the kind of micro-level data Frank suggests is necessary to gage the impact of public investment in community communications technologies.

3. What is community?

As the definition of community is always contentious, the use of the word “community” in this context requires a brief explanation. A recent newspaper article points out that, in today’s world, the word “community” imparts instant legitimacy (Leong, 2007). Canadian philosopher Mark Kingwell says that “Community, in a world of endless connections, has become a much more complicated concept.” (Kingwell …)

To address this difficulty, Barry Wellman has sought to expand the meaning of community from the traditional local, geographically based sense to one that is more easily understood in a technologically networked world. For the purposes of this study, we feel that Wellman’s concept of community as “a social network of interpersonal ties that provide(s) sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging, and social identity” provides an appropriate base for a definition (Quan-Haase, 2004: 115).

However, it needs to be clear that “virtual” communities or “communities of interest” are not the primary focus of this study. It is important to recognize that locality is broader than it once was and relations with groups across town can be as important as relations with groups in the immediate area. Nevertheless, as Schuler points out, while “virtual community” refers to social forms built upon communities of interest rather than geographic proximity, “community networks” translates citizen appropriation of interactive networks into the context of local democratic development (Schuler, 1996).

4. CRACIN survey: rationale and methodology

The CRACIN survey has been collecting information about Canadian community networking initiatives. These are primarily, but not exclusively, initiatives which receive funding from the federal CAP program as well as various other programs, both federal and provincial. A few participating sites (e.g. National Capital Freenet, Ottawa and Chebucto Community Network, Halifax) do not receive any funding from CAP.

The survey consists of two primary tools. The administrator survey collects general information about community networking sites and the people who manage them. It includes questions related to size and description of the site or sites, funding questions, questions about goals and objectives, as well as questions about community impacts. The user survey collects various user characteristics; why and how they use the service; and user social and community engagement activities.

The reasons for undertaking this survey were:
• to broaden the generalizability of the CRACIN research findings,
• to provide a more quantitative basis for policy recommendations,
• to substantiate (or not) “public good” outcomes
• to explore patterns of interaction emerging from the new “connected” community

Various activities undertaken in the preparation and implementation of this survey include:

• collecting information about related surveys (Appendix A)
• turning possible indicators of social capital/social cohesion in the context of community technology initiatives into survey questions (Appendices D & E)
• validating the surveys through focus groups (English & French)
• requesting and receiving ethics clearance through the University of Toronto Ethics Committee
• designing an on-line newsletter as dissemination tool to survey respondents and other interested parties (policy makers, researchers, community networking advocacy groups)

Potential survey candidates were located through various personal networks including:

• CRACIN community partners and case studies
• Members of Telecommunities Canada
• Personal and professional contacts

Over the course of 2007-8, the survey hopes to recover between 300-350 responses from English community network users and 100-150 responses from French users. These responses will be solicited through the network administrators who agree to participate. To reach some measure of provincial/territorial representation, the following goals for administrator participation were established:

• 15 each -- Ontario, Quebec
• 5 each -- British Columbia, Alberta
• 3 each -- Manitoba, Saskatchewan
• 2 each -- Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador
• 1 each -- Prince Edward Island, North West Territories, Yukon, Nunavut.

In this way, it was hoped that information can be gathered on a total of 56 sites across Canada and that, through these sites, about 400 individual user surveys could be collected.
5. Survey implementation process and responses to date

The following table represents attempts (successful and unsuccessful) to connect with potential survey respondents between January and March 2007:

Table 1: Contacts with potential survey respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prov</th>
<th>Survey goal</th>
<th>Contacts attempted</th>
<th>Agreed to participate</th>
<th>Total admin surveys received</th>
<th>Total user surveys received</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BC</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12 (6 require further information so not included in current analysis)</td>
<td>One completed admin survey but was not prepared to assist with user surveys; another sent user surveys, but no admin survey.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alta</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Administrator waiting for summer students to implement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sask</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Same as above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Man</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Same as above</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ont</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Difficult to establish contacts outside of personal network.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Que</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Translation needs updating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NB</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Not contacted yet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NS</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Contact pending</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PEI</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Contact pending</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newfld</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Contact pending</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NWT.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Not contacted yet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yuk</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Not contacted yet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nunavut</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Not contacted yet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals:</strong></td>
<td><strong>56</strong></td>
<td><strong>33</strong></td>
<td><strong>15</strong></td>
<td><strong>14</strong></td>
<td><strong>46</strong>*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* 40 used in current analysis
The participation of administrators is essential to the success of this project. The following process is used to build administrator support:

- e-mail contact is made with administrator asking for assistance
- administrator signs and returns consent form
- administrator completes and returns on-line administrator survey
- user surveys and instructions are sent to administrator – either via Canada Post or electronically or both – depending on site.
- Administrator distributes, collects and returns user surveys and consent forms

A. Comments on the survey process

Community networking administrators are usually overwhelmed with work and suffering from survey fatigue. They report having been the constant targets of surveys (usually from funders) for years. It is important not to pressure administrators, to try to get results too quickly. Interested administrators will help when they can but need to find ways to fit this into an already crowded schedule. It often requires many gentle reminders about completing the survey, sending it in, etc. It is definitely a “pull” process that doesn’t move ahead by itself. As a result, many sites are somewhere in-between initial contact and survey completion for several months. Others have not yet been contacted in order to keep the process manageable.

This multi-step process of getting from initial contact to receiving user surveys is lengthy and time consuming. It requires keeping a detailed record about who is where in the process. Getting initial agreement is difficult and successfully getting to the end of the process (return of user surveys) is even more difficult. Much of our success so far has been the result of personal connections through Telecommunities Canada (TC), most of whose members are community network administrators. Other connections have been made through contacts made at meetings and conferences or third party introductions through TC members. Only a few cold call e-mails or telephone calls have been attempted and they have not been successful at all.

At one point, consent forms for user surveys were presenting a serious impediment to the completion of user survey – particularly in small remote communities and especially in First Nations and Inuit communities. Administrators pointed out that there is more cultural sensitivity around personal identification in these populations. In March 2007, an application was made to the University of Toronto Ethics Review Committee for an amendment to the ethics protocol which would make the consent form optional at the discretion of the site administrators. This application was granted. The committee ruled that having read the information sheet and having agreed to participate could be interpreted as consent. However, we are still proceeding with consent forms where it is not seen as problematic.
6. Administrator survey – preliminary results

Community networks across Canada are very diverse. In their organization and funding, in the services they offer and the clientele they serve, they reflect the needs of their communities. The three sites profiled in “The good news about CAP” (Moll, 2007:10-13) offer a glimpse into that diversity and how it serves the communities involved. The survey, however, shows that there are also many similarities – in goals, programs and challenges – that can help researchers, advocates and policy makers understand and support this sector.

A. Number of sites represented and characteristics

14 responses have been received to date from administrators who have agreed to participate in the survey. 12 out of the 14 receive some CAP funding and therefore form part of the CAP network. Because of the way CAP is delivered across the country, some of the respondents represented multiple sites (see Table 2). The total number of sites represented by the 14 responses received is 787 and, where it was considered important to understanding the responses, some of the data have been presented in a way that reflects this disparity in size.

According to information from Industry Canada, there were 3,786 active CAP sites at the end of 2005 (Industry Canada, 2005b). Discounting 218 Manitoba sites that we understand, through the administrator, are not funded through the CAP program and the 2 other independent sites, the administrator surveys received to date would represent about 15% of the installed base of the federal CAP program in 2005.

Table 2: Number of sites, location and users

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Province</th>
<th>Network</th>
<th>Sites Represented</th>
<th>Rural</th>
<th>Remote</th>
<th>Urban</th>
<th>Inner City</th>
<th>Users /week</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BC</td>
<td>Vancouver Community Network</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>400+</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cariboo Chilcotin</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>60</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>200-399</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alta</td>
<td>Alberta Community Networking Assoc.</td>
<td>29</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>29</td>
<td>400+</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sask</td>
<td>Thickwood Hills Bus. &amp; Learning</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>28</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>200-399</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Network</td>
<td>Sites</td>
<td>Users</td>
<td>Schools</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>---------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Man Community Connections</td>
<td>400**</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>400+</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ontario Learning Enrichment Foundation</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>116</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>400+</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Christopher House</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>200-399</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K-Net</td>
<td>100+ ***</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>400+</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Capital Freenet</td>
<td>1 *</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>400+</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nova Scotia Chebucto Community Network</td>
<td>1 *</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>400+</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pictou Antigonish Regional Library</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>22</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>400+</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NWT NWT Centennial Library – Hay River</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>50-99</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NWT Inuvik Centennial Library</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>400+</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nunavut N-CAP</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>400+</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>787</td>
<td>344</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>283</td>
<td>37</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total %</strong></td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Community networks that act as local ISPs and receive no funding from CAP.
** Only 182 of these receive CAP funding.
*** Arbitrarily divided as no specific breakdown was provided.

The number of sites presented by some of the respondents reflects the way the CAP program is delivered across the country. As a result of various program adjustments since 1994, CAP has evolved into 13 different provincial/territorial projects. Some examples of different delivery modes are presented below:

- In Saskatchewan, there are four delivery agents -- PA Grand Council in the north, Marieval Enterprise Centre in the east central region, the Saskatchewan Library System in the south and Thickwood Hills Business and Learning Network in the west central region. The library system administers approximately 100 sites while the others total around 76 sites spread all over.

- Some CAP sites are administered through a Memorandum of Agreement (MOU) between Industry Canada and the provincial government. In Manitoba, an MOU
province, CAP is delivered by Community Connections, a special project within the Department of Science Technology, Energy and Mines (STEM). A related organization, the Manitoba E-Association, provides many of the related services including Help Desk Services to all access sites, Free Website design and support for Community Resource Networks. Industry Canada only provides funding for 182 out of 400 sites in Manitoba. The remainder are funded by the province.

- CAP sites in the Maritime provinces are also delivered through an MOU with the federal government.

- On PEI, there are 3 levels of CAP sites: Community Network Centre (CNC), Internet Support Centre (ISC) and Internet Express Centre (IEC). CNCs are the top level and have a manager in place to deliver programs. Jointly funded by a community partner, they will provide instruction and programs from the site as well as the manager (open year round minimum 25 hours/week). The ISC provides supervision and support to the users but doesn’t have a manager in place (open year round minimum 10 hours/week). The IEC sites generally provide little in the way of instruction, mainly providing access to a transient demographic group. PEI has 12 CNC sites, 24 ISC sites and 2 IEC sites, and has recently added 7 visitor information centres as sites as well.

- In Ontario, there are 13 organizations that administer funding for approximately 120 sites each. Two of these cover the city of Toronto – the Learning Enrichment Foundation and the Toronto Board of Education.

- In the NWT, the Smart Communities Society administers the CAP program for 21 CAP sites in 17 communities.

1. Location of sites

Of the sites represented in this data set, 44% identified as rural, 16% remote, 36% urban, and 5% inner city. All provinces and territories are represented except Quebec, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland and Yukon.

2. Number of users

The information gathered on number of users is unreliable. For questions like number of users per week, respondents, if they represented more than one site, were asked to generalize their responses – i.e. treat them as one site. As a result, 9/14 respondents indicated that they were serving more that 400 users per week, 3 said they were serving between 200-399 per week, and one responded 50-99 per week.

In this question, we had not anticipated the fact that some respondents would cover more than 100 sites and that some were also acting as local ISPs. This means the survey results
on numbers of users do not provide any reliable information. It would be necessary to go back to the administrators of large networks for a more precise response.

B. Services offered at sites surveyed

Administrators were asked to indicate which services were available through their site or sites. Table 3 indicates that, beyond access to computers and the internet, the most ubiquitous services were training courses, community portals, web hosting and electronic discussion forums.

Table 3: Services offered or supported at community networks prorated according to the number of sites represented by various respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of service</th>
<th># of sites out of 787 offering service</th>
<th>% of sites offering service</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Computer/internet access</td>
<td>787</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer/internet/web training courses</td>
<td>724</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community website or portal</td>
<td>669</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Webhosting for community groups/businesses</td>
<td>662</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electronic discussion forums</td>
<td>648</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment &amp; job skills training</td>
<td>323</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listserve hosting for local community groups</td>
<td>181</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telehealth applications</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (listed below)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The array of “other” available services that were offered at some of these sites reflect ways in which sites are responding to local needs:

- toll free help desk, help line – mentioned by 3 respondents
- access to IP based videoconferencing and IP bridge – mentioned by 2 respondents
- Technical services, mobile technical workshops
- dial-up access via a bank of 120 modems, telnet
- free refurbished computer equipment (up to 4 per year), equipment loans
- IP telephone services with gateways in several communities, webcasting, streaming video, video archiving, WAN networking services
• print and media development support, project management support, website design, database support, system design and construction, technology planning and support at the organizational level
• annual newsletter, bi-weekly article in region’s largest newspaper

C. Goals of the community networking sites

Administrators were asked to rank the goals and objectives of their sites on a scale of 1-5 with 5 representing “very important.”

Results showed that providing access to e-mail ranked very important for 14/14 respondents and enabling access to government and other web-based information was very important for 13/14, important for 1/14.

Supporting community economic development and providing a community meeting place were slightly less important but still ranked very highly – i.e. important (4) or very important (5) for most sites.

Figure 1: Supporting CED as per individual responses

Upgrading job related skills was seen as slightly less important than the goals previously discussed but more important for most sites than providing local computer support services, promoting community programs or offering literacy programs.

However, we cannot assume that a lower rating means that these particular areas are not being attended to. When the surveys are prorated according to the number of sites each
response represents, a different picture emerges. All of the respondents representing more than 100 sites ranked literacy programs as important or moderately important. In addition, Table 4 (section F) shows that 724 or 92% of 787 sites reported that they were offering programs for the literacy challenged. This is, perhaps, a better indication of the importance of literacy programs.

D. Perceived success at meeting the goals

Administrators were asked how successful they felt their sites had been at meeting the goals and objectives listed.

Almost all administrators felt they had been successful or very successful at providing access to e-mail (14/14) and government and other web services (11/13). Given that providing access to computers and the internet was seen as the problem that needed to be addressed in the early days of the CAP program, it must certainly be seen, from this perspective, to have been a great success. Technical access appears to have been achieved for the sites that responded to the survey – although, when asked how the site could be more effective, one administrator points out that bandwidth can still be a limiting factor. Later in this report, respondents to the user survey provide some information about whether they feel they can make “effective use” of the technical access available – i.e. How are they using these sites? Are their needs being met?

8/13 administrators felt they had been successful/very successful at providing a community meeting place and 7/13 had been successful/very successful at promoting community programs. More detail about these community programs is offered in the following sections.

Administrators were less confident about their success at supporting CED initiatives. 5/13 felt they had been successful or very successful. 6/13 felt they had been moderately successful. However, when this data was prorated, the 5 respondents that felt they had been successful or very successful represented 60% of the total number of sites represented. For those who felt they had been moderately or not so successful, this thread is picked up again further in this report where administrators were asked how they could improve the effectiveness of their sites. Several of them mentioned the need to become more skilled at developing strategic partnerships with individuals and groups.

One administrator summarized the goals and success in meeting these goals as follows:

“to build and support community capacity to develop and sustain local community networking services described above. There will always be more work to do in supporting community members to become effective users and innovators of these ICTs.”

---

1 Where the total is less than 14, this indicates that at least one administrator did not respond to the question
2 See section 7.E for more discussion on “effective use.”
It is quite likely that these points would be supported by all the respondents.

E. Funding issues

Depending on the services provided, community networks in Canada are often able to access some federal, provincial and local funding programs. Many are connected with the CAP program. Most try to partner with various local agencies and/or organizations, both public and private. Some sites are entirely provincially funded – e.g. some sites in Manitoba. This survey did not collect detailed information on funding sources. Some fairly detailed information was offered, none the less.

Results on questions about funding along with some comments on the issue are presented below:

- 12/14 admitted that funding was unstable (uncertain of renewal)
  
  “…. The community network supports the work of so many of our other programs (literacy, ESL, settlement services, employment programs etc.) Not only is the funding for our CAP sites less certain, so is the funding for our other programs. [CAP] funding has been extended for 6 months at a time. This year, it was cancelled and then re-established within 2 weeks. We still don't know if CAP funding will be extended beyond March 31st….”

- 12/13 were missing “core” funding

  “The CAP funding is an example of core funding. Still no announcement about funding for next year. It should be either yes or no. Don't keep the organizations dangling.”

- 10/12 were having cash flow problems

  “To a point, where staff at partner organization took out personal loans for their cash flow projects.”

- 10/13 said programs offered had been affected

  “Organizational priorities need to be adjusted on a continual basis as different funding opportunities become available. Deciding which programs and services to continue to develop and support depends entirely on the availability of funding that can maintain particular initiatives both on the network operational side and the application side. The annual struggle for funds and the uncertainty of government priorities and agenda makes it very difficult to establish long term plans and support sustained community development…… .”
• 3/13 have some user fees as a result of funding changes

“Cost recovery refers to services provided to the public comparable to a fee for service for courses so that we can pay the instructor or if it is photocopying or faxing etc. We never turn anyone away because they don't have any money to pay.”

F. Importance of community networking sites

In an attempt to find out, from administrators, what difference they thought the network had made in the community, the survey included a number of impact questions including questions about hosting community events, programs for specific communities, effectiveness and potential areas of improvement.

1. Hosting community events

“Providing a community meeting place” was tied with “supporting community economic development” as the third most important goal of the sites surveyed so far. 9 out of 14 administrators representing 728 out of 787 sites represented (or 93%) indicated that they did host community events. Many took advantage of the opportunity to explain the kinds of events involved.

Two categories of activities were mentioned:

Continuing education outreach:
• Sponsoring workshops associated with local public conferences; forums and conferences including technology conferences and CED conferences
• Reading programs for children, adult education programs, local history programs
• Various literacy programs, music/puppetry/art events
• Senior computer classes
• Special training workshops are available on a continual basis in a variety of areas. For example, the telehealth team is hosting a variety of public health education sessions on different topics. Economic and small business development sessions are hosted online. Special education and teacher professional development sessions are other examples of online sessions. These sessions are archived and made available to the public. Different conferences and workshops are designed so community members can participate online if they are unable to attend in person
• Advocacy, professional development

Social outreach:
• A public event in association with the AGM
• Monthly afternoon tea for seniors
• Graduations
• Hosting semi-annual community gatherings
• Hosting bi-monthly presentations by participants that are open to the public.
• Sponsoring awards
• Fundraising events; a dance or a concession

From these responses it is clear that community networks do play a role in supporting real time community connections. CRACIN researcher Diane Dechief, who interviewed immigrant volunteers at the Vancouver Community Network, showed how diverse the benefits can be. Dechief concludes that “VCN, communities, and the volunteers themselves all benefit as interactions at VCN contribute to newcomers’ settlement processes. These contributions include involving recent immigrants in a not-for-profit organization, supplying training for volunteer roles, offering a space to interact and share information with others, and providing a means to gain “Canadian experience” including references for potential employers…… Collectively, these interactions create social capital and enhance social inclusion at a community level” (Dechief, 2005).

2. Programs designed for specific sectors

Administrators were asked whether their sites offered programs for specific sectors. Perhaps the most interesting results in this group of responses is that, although 11/13 administrators reported elsewhere that they had formed partnerships with local community and business organizations, in this section only one administrator reported that they were offering programs for businesses and institutions. Although this was a response entered under “other” and not one of the choices on the list, it still stands as a potential area of opportunity for community networks.

Table 4: Targeted programs prorated by number of sites represented

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sector</th>
<th># of respondents out of 14</th>
<th># of sites represented (out of 787)</th>
<th>% of 787 sites offering programs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Youth</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>757</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literacy challenged</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>724</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>705</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seniors</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>671</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Nations</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>659</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>640</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immigrants</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>556</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Persons with disabilities</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>522</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Businesses and institutions</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In this preliminary data, it should also be noted that there were more rural (44%) and remote (16%) respondents than respondents from urban (36%) and inner city (5%). Clearly, youth, literacy challenged and the unemployed are high on the list in all areas. However, more responses from urban and inner city sites where immigrants are typically located would probably result in a higher percentage of programs designed for immigrants.

A separate question asked if the involvement of volunteers helped reach particular members of the community and how this worked. Two of the responses were:

“Volunteers are organized into an internationalization team to translate portions of the web portal into other languages. Youth volunteers are organized into a web development to design a youth portal. Volunteers participate as Internet trainers for increasing the capacity of community groups to use the Internet.”

“We can provide computer tutoring to people in various languages that are relevant to our community. We also have high level computer groups for ICT professionals - many of whom are newcomers seeking Canadian Experience.”

The latter comment again corroborates the findings of CRACIN researcher Diane Dechief noted in the previous section (Dechief, 2005).

G. Area in which the community network has had its greatest impact

Administrators were very forthcoming on their views about the impact of their services. The responses which were provided for areas of greatest impact indicates that these sites have a very large footprint in their communities. Other surveys have already confirmed this:

- A 2001 GPI (Genuine Progress Index) Atlantic survey of rural CAP sites in British Columbia indicated that the benefits extended far beyond the provision of Internet access and computer skills training. “CAP sites play an important role in strengthening rural communities, enhancing communication and reducing isolation, facilitating inclusion of youth, seniors and disadvantaged groups, promoting equity and providing opportunities for education, employment and local learning.” It also showed that CAP volunteers contributed an estimated 630,000 hours of voluntary time each year to British Columbia's rural CAP sites. "These volunteer hours are worth $9.5 million annually and are the equivalent of 330 full-time jobs," says the survey report (Coleman, 2002).

- The CAP network, as a result of an impact survey done in 2004, reports that CAP is a collaboration platform that has, each year, spawned over 2000 additional projects across the country, engaged over 20,000 community partners, leveraged
over $150 million and touched over 5 million Canadians over and above CAP site visits (CANCAP, 2004).

Impact statements from administrators participating in the CRACIN survey:

1. Capacity building, innovation and interaction, reducing isolation

- The transformative change that is happening in the delivery of services in the different sectors including health, education, business and governance is evident in various degrees in every community. Removing some of the isolation that people experience in remote and rural communities as well as providing people with more services and choices creates a different freedom that is showing both positive and negative results. New challenges and opportunities become available when broadband connections and applications are introduced into the workplace and into the homes in the different communities. Individual community members are now able to make choices (education, health, careers, etc)

- It provides a feeling that they are connected and that their rural communities can take part in the information age. It enables a "can do" attitude towards other community based projects.

- Building capacity for other nonprofit groups.

- Access leveraging of CAP programs into other initiatives, skill training software production, services, maintenance (repair and ICT planning)

- Social networking, community building, volunteer ("Canadian Experience"), computer and other employment skills.

- able to place sites where we can cover the whole spectrum of needs

3. Access

- We believe we have introduced in excess of 30,000 people to the Internet and we have made it possible for people with little income to have free access to the Internet and other IT services.

- In providing computer access to unemployed and low income people, by providing computer access to community members who would not have this access available to them elsewhere in the community.

- The number of children that use the facility as well as the use in the summer by tourists.

- Helping to support access initiatives whereby residents of the National Capital region have managed to connect to the Internet in cases where they would otherwise not be afforded that ability.

- Access to reliable dial-up access to Internet and email for users

4. Learning and support

- Increasing the utilization rate of the technology by people who have no opportunity to access the technology.

- IT skills and literacy
• We impact the unemployed, at risk youth, disadvantaged adults, especially women.
• Help desk support by technically trained volunteers.

H. Areas in which sites could be more effective

Administrators were also asked to identify key areas of development that would enhance their sites and make them more effective. The following areas were suggested:

1. Community driven innovation/ responding to community needs
   • Local employment and training initiatives in the ongoing development and operation of the network and the different broadband applications so many of the centralized functions can be devolved to the network "edge communities" thus creating local wealth and opportunities. Supporting and encouraging community innovation and effective use of the network and its services by all users. The creation of small business and community-based initiatives that address and utilize local resources and opportunities that include the local community network. The reversal of the environmental drain that urban institutions and corporate entities create that results in the destruction of natural resources and people.
   • Ability to develop common goals among partners and invest in solutions as partners (leverage). Ability to create infrastructure needed by community mostly in the area of database creation. Understanding and adoption of issues and innovation.
   • Develop more strategic partnerships with other institutions and groups.
   • Consistent promotion and slightly more standardization of services offered.
   • Community economic development

2. Human resources
   • The level of service we are able to offer the public could be increased through the skill and knowledge of our staff.
   • Volunteer recruitment and training.
   • Would be nice to have more assistance available at the site.
   • Responding to the ever shifting training needs of a community.

3. Technical resources
   • We need to be able to provide high speed connectivity and we are in the process of introducing a wireless service.
   • The level of technology and equipment available could be increased to better serve the needs of our public.
   • It would be great to be able to keep our hardware and software up to date, more adaptive technologies, more physical space -- all are constrained by funding.

4. Funding
• Finding long term funding to make us more sustainable, increase our partnering efforts.

I. Summary and comments on administrator survey

There is no doubt that a great deal has been achieved by community networking sites in Canada. So far, this survey of administrators of community networks seems to indicate that access to computers and the internet, although not entirely resolved, is no longer the greatest challenge facing these sites. The sites have also been very successful in social and educational outreach and offering programs for specific sectors. There is a potential area of program expansion into offering programs to small businesses and institutions. More programs that reach out to local businesses also open up opportunities for new partnering arrangements – an expressed need among administrators who replied to the survey.

Unstable funding, however makes these sites very vulnerable and serves as a limiting factor in addressing their challenges. Supporting CED, though a well established goal, remains a challenge that can only be addressed by making the most of local resources and opportunities. This requires a reasonable amount of funding stability as do the other challenges identified such as the need for more human resources, better partnering skills, and the need to find innovative ways to promote community capacity building.

Supporting such diverse needs is also a challenge for funding agencies. It is worth noting that, because community networks are very diverse and because they are constantly resource-starved, they can become isolated. Supporting the internal connectedness of the group is one way of supporting its individual members. As noted in the Making Waves article “The West Coast has always been particularly well organized around community technology. BC CAP sites are part of a cohesive provincial movement that recognized early on that community connectivity was a key to economic development. Community networking advocates in BC are proactive and have worked hard to keep that policy objective on the agenda of provincial, municipal and federal officials.” (Moll, 2007:12) According to Bev Collins, Executive Director of the Pacific Community Networks Association (PCNA) their Annual Summit is “fast becoming the biggest gathering of its kind in Canada. With delegates from First Nation communities, non-profit, SMEs and government, it's truly cross-sectoral. No matter what the political climate is, our networks and sites get together and encourage each other, strategize, share experiences and provide each other with tools and we continue that communication year-round” (Moll, 2007:12). This climate of connectedness is essential to effective capacity building across the country. That's clearly an important part of any success story.
7. User survey – preliminary results

The user survey collects a wide range of information on user characteristics, activities and preferences. Particular emphasis was placed on determining which activities were most popular with users at community networking sites and what role staff and volunteers played in helping users with these activities. We were also very interested in documenting community cross-over activities -- i.e. how activities at the sites interact with the community at large.

To date, user surveys have been collected from eight different sites – four in Ontario, two in British Columbia, one in Nova Scotia, and one in the Northwest Territories. Although we have administrator surveys from 14 sites, a number of sites that have completed administrator surveys have not yet sent in user surveys. At present, 46 user surveys have been collected, with 40 of them being fully usable. On the basis of these initial responses, this section presents a preliminary snapshot of community network users in Canada.

A. Preliminary Demographic Details

There is a virtual split in the current sample between male (47.5%) and female (50%) respondents (the discrepancy in total percentage is due to some of the responses being left blank). The largest group of users by age were in the 31-40 year old category. Half of the total respondents were under 40, while the combined age groups of 30-50 make up almost two thirds of all respondents.

1. Age groups

Although these results seem to suggest that community networks attract more middle aged users, this is probably not the case. The age group distribution in this survey is not an indication of who comes to the site, but rather who was willing to take the time to fill out the survey. As a point of reference, administrators surveyed in the 2002 GPI Atlantic survey of rural CAP sites in British Columbia reported that 46% of CAP volunteers were 45 and older while 46% of users were 25 and younger. (Coleman, 2002) Despite the difficulties inherent in getting a representative sample of a constantly changing user population to fill out a lengthy survey for no compensation, responses to this survey do provide invaluable information about the users who participated and their activities at the site.

2. Immigrant status

With respect to immigrant status, 45% of respondents indicated they were not born Canadian citizens. Of those who indicated their country of origin, respondents identified France, Russia, Albania, Vietnam, Macedonia, Trinidad West Indies, Bangladesh, U.K.,
Iran, China, and Bulgaria. 47.5% of respondents indicated they were born as Canadian citizens, while 7.5% chose to leave the question unanswered. As already discussed in section F of the report on the administrator survey, community networking sites located in urban and inner city areas play an important role in integrating recent immigrants.

3. Income

Income distribution analysis of the user population represented in this sample reveals that almost 40% had an annual household income of less than $9,999 per year. Further analysis showed that 10 out of 17 respondents or 59% over the age of 40 had an annual household income of less than $20,000 – well below the before-tax low-income cut-off for a family of two living in a medium size urban area as established by Statistics Canada in 2005. (National Council on Welfare, 2006). For this particular sample of respondents, it appears that community networks are serving a group that would otherwise be on the wrong side of the digital divide.

B. General Activities

We asked respondents to tell us a little bit about their basic usage patterns at the site, and their general satisfaction with the site. The majority of respondents made use of the sites at least a few times a week, if not every day. Furthermore, the vast majority, almost 75%, of users indicated the site always met their computing needs in terms of availability and hours of service.

We were also looking for specific patterns of use related to twelve popular computer activities. The activities are listed below according to their use patterns as reported by this group of respondents:

Table 5: Computer and internet activities – frequency of use

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Every day</th>
<th>Several times/week</th>
<th>Total*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Send/receive e-mail</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>32.5%</td>
<td>72.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surf the internet for fun or general interest</td>
<td>22.5%</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>57.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read news from Canadian sources</td>
<td>22.5%</td>
<td>32.5%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type letters using a</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>24.5%</td>
<td>54.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3 A low-income household is one that spends a disproportionate amount of its income on the necessities of life such as food, shelter and clothing according to the National Council on Welfare. (2007). Fact Sheet: Definitions of the Most Common Poverty Lines Used in Canada - June 2003. http://www.ncwnbnes.net/documents/researchpublications/OtherFactSheets/PovertyLines/2003DefinitionsPovertyLinesENG.htm
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>First Site (%)</th>
<th>Second Site (%)</th>
<th>Overall (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>wordprocessing program</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Search for local/community events</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Read news from other countries</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Search for government information</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>42.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seek health related information</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>37.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engage in independent study</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>27.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play music</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play games</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchase or sell goods and/or services</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* These do not add up to 100 as not all choices are reflected here

Comments:

1) Typing letters

We are surprised to find typing letters so high on this list. This may be due to the small number of sites sampled so far and the particular programs offered at these sites. If this activity does maintain its position once more responses are collected, it may be an indication of the users’ need for assistance with interacting software/hardware components (i.e. printers/computers) or the fact that, although many users have computers at home (as indicated later in this report), they may not have printers or word processing software or they may be lacking some particular features (i.e. multilingual character sets). It is also an indication that these sites play important roles beyond internet searching and e-mailing.

2) Searching for local information

50% of respondents made use of the site to search for information on local events at least once a week, if not more frequently. On the flip side, however, almost one quarter of respondents indicated they never used the site for such purposes. Perhaps of note, of the 14 respondents who indicated they rarely, or never, searched for local information, six of them were from one specific site, with the remainder reasonably distributed across the other sites. The site in question is a small remote community that may not have needed technical assistance to know what was going on in their community.
3) Searching for government information

We also asked respondents about their information seeking habits with respect to government services. As with local information searching, the distribution is balanced at either end of the frequency spectrum:

Table 6: Searching for government information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How frequently do you use this site to search for Government information?</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Daily</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A few times per week</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Once a week</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A few times per month</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rarely</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The upper two frequencies (Daily/A few times per week) represent 37.5% of all respondents, as do the bottom two frequencies (Rarely/Never).

42.5% used the site to search for government information once per week or more. This shows that, although not as popular as sending e-mail, web-surfing or checking news sources, searching for government information was still an important activity at community networking sites. A further analysis could provide information about whether
users were concentrated in certain age groups, locations or income levels. The survey did not collect information about the kinds of government information users were looking for in their searches.

4) **Seeking health related information**

It is interesting to note the extent to which users where seeking health related information: 10% reported this as a daily activity and 27.5% reported they were seeking such information several times per week. The use of the internet as a growing source for such information could be seen as an expressed desire by users for a better understanding of health related matters and perhaps even desire for more input/control. It also raises the question of what users do with this information and how they evaluate information coming from various internet sources. There could be an opportunity for partnerships with community health related organizations to offer workshops/information sessions in searching for and evaluating such information.

**C. Importance of community networking sites**

Respondents were asked to consider how important these sites were for various online information seeking needs. The results presented in the chart below indicate the percentage of respondents who said the sites were either “very important” or “important” to their information needs, as compared with other sources of information:

Table 7: Relative importance of sites for information needs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of online activity</th>
<th>Cumulative % of rankings very important &amp; important</th>
<th>Type of online activity</th>
<th>Cumulative % of rankings very important &amp; important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Looking for local information (vs. tv/paper/radio)</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>Helping communicate with people (vs. phone/postal service)</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looking for employment information (vs. tv/paper/radio)</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>Helping find employment (vs. training/peer support, networking, etc.)</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From these responses, we can see that new information and communication technologies have quickly assumed a very important place in the lives of respondents. In the next few years, we can only expect these numbers to go up as the internet becomes increasingly
integrated into the daily information stream. Any citizens who do not have effective access to such services will by at a very great disadvantage.

D. Engaging in individual support and personal networking activities

We were interested in the extent to which users engaged in self-directed learning activities at the sites as well as the extent to which the sites facilitated interaction with other people – both online and off. The following question focussed on individual growth and improvement activities as well as personal networking activities that users might undertake at or through the site:

Table 8: Individual support and personal networking activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Did using the computers at this site to help you to…</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Not applicable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>…improve your computer skills</td>
<td>77.5%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…improve your internet skills</td>
<td>77.5%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…find health related information</td>
<td>72.5%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…stay in contact with non-local friends/family</td>
<td>70.0%</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…stay in contact with local friends/family</td>
<td>65.0%</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…further your employment skills</td>
<td>65.0%</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>27.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…learn about community events</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…look for employment</td>
<td>62.5%</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…improve your basic literacy skills</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…prepare a resumé/employment letter</td>
<td>55.0%</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…help you meet new people</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>27.5%</td>
<td>22.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…deal with personal challenges</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
<td>27.5%</td>
<td>22.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…connect with support groups</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
<td>35.0%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Improving computer and internet skills are clearly the primary learning activities at the sites. But “finding health related information” holds an unanticipated third place in the positive responses to the activities on this list. A previous question (Table 5) showed that 37.5% of these respondents looked for health related information every day or a few times per week. Once the sample size has been expanded, a more detailed analysis of these findings -- including age/ location/ income level breakdowns – will be undertaken. This could shed some interesting light on new ways of managing personal health and welfare issues.

Respondents were asked to indicate whether or not using the computer at the site helped them learn more about events, groups, services, and issues in their local community. The response to this question correlated well with a similar question in a previous section – i.e. 62.5% of respondents indicated in Table 8 that the computers at the site had been
useful for helping them learn about their local community, while 60% had previously indicated in Table 5 that they searched for local information frequently. A further analysis found that most of the respondents who found the site useful for local information in Table 8 came from urban and inner city sites. This might be an indication that the need is greater in such areas as making connections is often much more difficult in cities where anonymity and isolation are more common.

The user survey was particularly interested in how the sites facilitated personal networking and face-to-face interaction. In response to this question, most users indicated that use of the computers at the site had helped them stay in contact with both local and non-local friends and family. Delving deeper into community connections, it appears that the sites were also instrumental in helping users extend their local social networks. We asked if the computers at the site had helped respondents meet new people. 50% of the respondents indicated the site had helped. This correlates well with the findings in the administrator survey analysis (sections 6.C & 6.D) which indicated that providing a community meeting place was the third most important goal of the sites surveyed so far and one in which they felt they had been quite successful.

The relatively high level of “not applicable” in some of these areas is also interesting. It is likely that “not applicable” is an indication that the activity in question was not available at that site or that this was not among the users’ expectations or needs when coming to the site. A user who had no need, for example, to improve basic literacy skills or prepare a résumé might check “not applicable” rather than “no” to these questions.

E. The role of staff and volunteers

The importance of “effective use” of new technologies -- i.e. “The capacity and opportunity to successfully integrate ICTs into the accomplishment of self or collaboratively identified goals” (Gurstein, 2003) -- is well documented in community networking literature and has been recognized by policy makers as a key piece of the strategic infrastructure needed in a “networked” society. The recent report of the Telecommunications Policy Review Panel (TPRP) acknowledged that the social infrastructures that enable the use of ICTs were at least as important as the technical infrastructure and that the community was the key provider of the social infrastructure:

“A new generation of ICT applications allows communities to adapt ICTs to their own situations, develop local content, and access and use content created by others. However, none of this will happen in the absence of e-literacy and technology skills at the community level…. [T]he Canadian Research Alliance for Community Innovation and Networking noted in its submission to the Panel that community networks and other community-based organizations provide both technological and social infrastructures for ICT development and innovation. Through training programs, for example, they help ensure that all Canadians, particularly those most at risk of being left behind, have the necessary skills to
participate in a networked economy” (Telecommunications Policy Review Panel, 2006: 7-43)

Although the GPI Atlantic study (Coleman, 2002) gathered data on the importance of volunteers in rural BC CAP sites, the information gathered came from the administrators, rather from users of the sites. In the CRACIN survey, users were asked to indicate if staff and volunteers had helped them with the activities already mentioned in Table 7.

Table 9: The role of staff/volunteers in the effective use of resources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Did the staff/volunteers at this site to help you to…</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Not applicable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>…improve your internet skills</td>
<td>70.0%</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>22.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…improve your computer skills</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…learn about community events</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>27.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…help you meet new people</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>35.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…further your employment skills</td>
<td>47.5%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>42.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…find health related information</td>
<td>42.5%</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…prepare a resume/employment letter</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…look for employment</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
<td>47.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…deal with personal challenges</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…connect with support groups</td>
<td>35.0%</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
<td>47.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…improve your basic literacy skills</td>
<td>35.0%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…stay in contact with non-local friends/family</td>
<td>30.0%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>45.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>…stay in contact with local friends/family</td>
<td>27.5%</td>
<td>25.0%</td>
<td>47.5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From the responses, it is clear that the staff and volunteers at the sites played an important role in the users’ ability to make effective use of the resources at the sites. Staff and volunteers appear to have been especially instrumental in helping respondents improve their computer and internet skills, which in turn would make them less dependent on assistance with basic computer activities such as e-mail. Of the 77.5% who said using the computers at the site helped them with their computer and internet skills, 60% and 70% respectively said staff and volunteers were important in facilitating these activities.

Once again, there was a high level of “no” or “not applicable” responses, probably for reasons similar to those already mentioned above.

There was an opportunity for write-in comments about the staff and volunteers, most of which were glowing:

“… the staff as well as the volunteers of the community networking program have helped me in a way to be more confident, helped me tap into those inner computer
skills that I thought I lost way back in school. They also helped me enjoy myself on the computers instead of making it feel like such a chore.”

In a related question, when asked whether they agreed with statements regarding their competency level with computers and internet searches, 62.5% strongly agreed with the statement “I am very experienced using the computer” and 55% strongly agreed with the statement “I am very experienced using the internet”. If the comment above can be used as any indication, the fairly high confidence level about ability to use these tools could well be related to the assistance provided by staff and volunteers at the centers.

F. Searching or sharing

For those who reported, in Table 8, that they were using the resources at the site to look for health related information, further results showed that the information seeking, not information sharing, was the major activity in this area. The survey included a specific set of questions asking if users contributed to discussion groups, or posted to newsgroups/websites/blogs in specific areas of politics, cultural issues, health issues, lifestyle issues, and economic issues. The preliminary results show that, for the most part, respondents rarely used the sites to contribute to online discussions in these areas. When they did participate in such online discussions, it was mainly on health & lifestyle issues. Further analysis revealed no significant difference in age and gender divisions in these two categories than in the other categories.

It will be interesting to see if these results shift as more responses are received. There has always been considerable optimism around the use of new technologies to engage the public on political issues. According to these preliminary responses, this is not a priority activity at community networking sites. It should be noted that the current analysis does not include any responses from Quebec.

G. Community networks and skills acquisition

Respondents were asked to indicate how they made use of the sites to upgrade various computer related skills. Just over half the respondents had taken at least one course. Of the respondents who had taken courses, most had taken courses on how to use the internet and computers, but less than half had taken courses on how to look for employment. There was an almost even split among users taking courses or not on computer software training. Other types of courses mentioned by respondents included: reading, group literacy, accounting, website design, hardware trouble shooting, drafting software, digital camera use, and project management. Some indicated they would have liked to have access to courses on graphic production related to business cards etc.

As already noted in Table 8, looking for employment, furthering employment skills, and writing resumés were activities pursued by 55-65% of community network users. However, less than ½ have taken courses on how to look for employment. Since almost 40% reported an average annual income of less than $10,000 per year, it seems as though
there might be more of a demand in these sites for courses related to employment. Further analysis could tell us if such courses were actually available in these sites for respondents who reported they were not using the sites for employment related activities.

H. Civic engagement

1) Political engagement

In this section, we asked about users’ political activities, both on- and off-line. Of general note, just over half had voted in the most recent federal, provincial, and municipal elections, just below the national average of 60% in the last federal election. However, for the most part, that remained the extent of their political involvement. Only 7% of respondents to this survey indicated they had worked for, or attended meetings of a political party. Moreover, other than discussions or debates with friends and neighbours, virtually none of the respondents had participated in activities such as contacting local politicians, attending public meetings, writing letters to newspaper editors, or participating in local political action or community groups. Further comparison with national averages on these issues is needed to place this information in a wider context.

In examining the importance of the community networking site to the respondents in helping them participate in those same activities, once again, most indicated the site was less important or not at all important compared to other resources.

2) Volunteering

A very different view of civic engagement emerged in the responses to questions about volunteering activities among respondents and how/if they found support for these activities through the sites.

Almost 2/3 of respondents had volunteered in some form or another in the past 12 months, with their time commitments evenly distributed across the response categories. In a snapshot of some of the types of volunteering activities undertaken, we see that:

37.5% helped organize or supervise events for an organization
27.5% did administrative work for an organization
25% taught or coached in an organization
25% collected/delivered/served food and other goods
20% sat on a board or executive committee

As with political engagement, some further analysis involving comparisons with national surveys on volunteering is needed to put this in a wider context.

When asked about the importance of the site to their volunteering activities, approximately 50% of the respondents indicated that e-mail and internet access at the site was equally as important, if not a very important source. Similarly, approximately 50%
of respondents indicated the staff/volunteers at the site were at least an equally important source of support compared to other resources, with many saying it was a very important resource.

As already mentioned in the analysis of administrator surveys, the 2002 GPI Atlantic survey of rural CAP sites in British Columbia indicated a very high level of volunteerism and community involvement around the operation of community networking sites (Coleman, 2002). The CRACIN survey has attempted to evaluate the impact of the community networking site on volunteerism in the wider community. The results appear to show that the sites are, indeed, important facilitators of social capital in the wider community. As noted in the GPI Atlantic survey, this kind of community activity is often underestimated and undervalued:

“[t]he strength of society’s commitment to voluntary work is, for many social scientists, a touchstone of social health, stability and harmony. A weak civil society, by contrast, is more subject to social unrest, alienation and disintegration. It is associated with higher rates of crime, drug abuse, and other dysfunctional activities, which eventually produce high social and economic costs. From this perspective, wise investments in community and other voluntary associations can help strengthen the fabric of civil society, and produce long term economic savings.” (Coleman, 2002)

CRACIN researcher Ken Werbin suggests that “CAP sites have in fact been operating in a completely different way than was intended. Where they were designed to provide people with ICT access and training ... [s]uccessful community-networking initiatives tended to actively encourage, support and maintain the ‘third spaces’ emerging around ICT in the community center” (Werbin, 2006: 24). Werbin found that “access to such valuable, physical, on-the-fly ‘third spaces’ where site users have the chance to meet others and develop social networks, plays a far greater role in fostering a sense of community than mere technological access and training alone” (2006:24).

Given the importance of social cohesion as an initial policy goal for the CAP program, evidence that these sites contribute to the social as well as economic stability of their communities should be carefully considered in policy decisions around the role such services play in Canadian communities, the level of support they should be accorded, and who should assume responsibility.

I. Users and access to other computer resources

Respondents were asked if they had a computer at home. If they indicated they did, we asked them to write in why they chose to use the community networking site rather than their home computer. 80% of respondents said they had a computer at home. Their reasons, then, for using the sites are broadly summarized as follows:

- No internet access or slower internet access with their home computers.
- To take advantage of the training and software course offerings.
• To seek personal assistance with online searches.
• A few indicated their computer at home was shared and they preferred the privacy of the community networking site – an unanticipated response given that these are public sites.
• Special facilities -- one respondent noted that the computer at home was not set up to read Chinese characters but that this service was available at the site.

Just as the public library is more than a repository of books to be loaned and borrowed, it appears that community networking sites serve many roles in the community beyond access to computers and internet resources.

J. Summary and comments – user survey

Although it is too early to draw broad conclusions in the user survey, there are already a few findings of considerable interest:

1. 59% of respondents over the age of 40 had an annual household income of less than $20,000 – indicating a high level of economic need among respondents. (Section A)

2. The most popular computer activities at sites were around e-mail and web-searching, as expected. But an unusually high number of respondents said that they frequently typed letters using a word processor at the site – indicating the need for a variety of services at these sites. (Section B)

3. An unexpectedly high number of respondents reported using the sites to search for health related information. There is a possible role for more assistance with health related information needs at these sites. (Section B & D)

4. The help of staff and volunteers was very important to respondents trying to use the resources at the sites. (Section E)

5. There is a possible role for more employment related courses/services through these sites. (Section G)

6. Sites were rarely used for political engagement. (Section H)

7. Sites were heavily used to facilitate community wide volunteering activities. (Section H)

8. Sites play a significant role in facilitating local social interaction. (Section H)

We will be carefully tracking these and other trends as further data is collected and analyzed.
8. Social cohesion and its role as a policy instrument

Not included
To be added in next version

9. Social capital and the social economy

Not included
To be added in next version

10. Conclusions and further links to policy

Not included
To be added in next version

11. References

   http://www.tc.ca/cap/canadanews/

   http://www.gpiatlantic.org/publications/abstracts/econvalue-cap-ab.htm


   http://www.firstmonday.org/issues/issue8_12/gurstein/#g5

   http://www.tbs-sct.gc.ca/rma/dpr1/04-05/IC-IC/IC-ICd4506_e.asp

8. Kingwell, Mark ............... 


