In 2000, one of Canada’s leading Aboriginal community networks, the Kuh-ke-nah Network, or K-Net, was on the verge of expanding into broadband services. (For more on K-Net, see chapter 14.) K-Net’s management organization, Kee-waytinook Okimakanak Tribal Council, had acquired funding and resources to become one of Industry Canada’s Smart Communities demonstration projects. Among the innovative services that K-Net introduced at the time was MyKnet.org, a system of personal home pages intended for remote First Nations users in a region of Northern Ontario where numerous communities have lived without adequate residential telecom service well into the millennium (Fiser, Clement, and Walmark 2006; Ramirez et al. 2003). Shortly thereafter, and through K-Net’s community-based Internet infrastructure, this free-of-charge, free-of-advertising, locally supported, online social environment grew from its core constituency of remote First Nations communities to host over 30,000 registered user accounts (of which approximately 20,000 represent active home pages). The numbers are notable given that the system primarily serves members of Northern Ontario’s over fifty First Nations communities, whose combined population totals approximately 45,000, occupying a geographic area roughly the size of France. Equally significant is that over half of this population is under the age of 25, making MyKnet.org primarily a youth-driven online social environment.
In this chapter we report on a study investigating the development of MyKnet.org and its embeddedness within the particular rural/remote First Nations context of Northern Ontario. We postulate that MyKnet.org has become a vibrant medium for Northern Ontario First Nations in part as a result of its historical connections with K-Net’s broader “computerization movement” and older Indigenous media practices in Northern Ontario. We explore both how MyKnet.org grew out of a drive for broadband telecom service in the region and how it currently plays an important socio-cultural role by enabling First Nations individuals and communities to shape web space and extend their social ties online.

A number of scholars (see, for example, Forte 2006; Landzelius 2006a; Srinivasan 2006) have discussed the potential of new media technologies for Indigenous peoples, particularly for sharing knowledge, constructing identities, and communicating across distances and borders. According to Srinivasan (2006), the challenge for Indigenous communities and their collaborators is to tailor new media and information systems to specific local cultural needs. We believe that, as an Indigenous-controlled online medium, MyKnet.org meets this challenge. The success of MyKnet.org extends the observation made by Anderson (1991) and others that older media such as print and radio have played a role in the social construction of community and concepts such as Indigenousness and nationhood.

**RESEARCH CONTEXT**

We use the term *First Nation* to designate an Indian band registered with Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, in accordance with the Indian Act (R.S., 1985). Each First Nations community occupies its own reserve and participates in local governance through the auspices of a band office directed by an elected chief and council. At the time of the 2006 census, there were an estimated 698,025 First Nations people in Canada and 615 First Nations bands, representing fifty-two distinct cultural-territorial groups (Cree, Haida, Mohawk, Ojibwe, etc.). In Ontario, where this study took place, there were approximately 158,395 First Nations people, many of them living in rural or remote environments, and a total of 134 First Nations communities (Statistics Canada 2006).

MyKnet.org is particularly significant in the lives of First Nations individuals in Northern Ontario who occupy land apportioned by Treaties 9 and 5. This land corresponds to a political territory known as Nishnawbe Aski Nation (NAN), which is home to over fifty First Nations communities. Communities in and around NAN are remote: they have no year-round road access and are generally located north of the 50th parallel and/or over 50 kilometres from the nearest service centre. Most are fly-in communities, although some
have devised temporary winter roads (constructed across frozen lakes) to link into a southern supply corridor during the months of February and March. In the absence of such roads, it costs anywhere from CAD$400 to $4,000 for a one-way trip by scheduled aircraft to the nearest town, Sioux Lookout (in Ontario), or the larger proximate cities of Thunder Bay, Ontario, and Winnipeg. Under such conditions, personal mobility is severely restricted for most of the region’s inhabitants.

Our research draws from three years of community-based research, initiated with Northern Ontario First Nations under a partnership between Keewaytinook Okimakanak (the tribal council that manages K-Net) and the Canadian Research Alliance for Community Innovation and Networking (CRACIN). With guidance from staff at K-Net and the Keewaytinook Okimakanak Research Institute, we designed our research plan to establish community participation and community control over data collection. Under this research plan, Budka and Fiser visited more than twenty First Nation communities, and numerous fieldwork activities were undertaken. These included visits to schools and public Internet-access points, such as e-centres in local communities, and individual and group discussions with youth and adults (both offline and online), as well as researcher participation in youth training and employment programs and video conference discussions. This fieldwork provided us with important foundational information regarding the region, its communities, and their development and use of media technologies, in addition to establishing working relationships with people in the region.

In order to gain a more thorough understanding of MyKnet.org, online and telephone interviews were conducted with the explicit goal of exploring the development, uses, and meanings of MyKnet.org. Initially, we sought the perspectives of administrators, early innovators, casual users, and non-users. However, following input from this community, we broadened our scope to include respondents who could help us compare MyKnet.org with other media in the First Nations (particularly community radio and satellite television) and who could help us explore the traditional and popular cultural context of First Nations individuals’ media usage.

Our resulting sample for this particular research included ten interviews completed by teleconference, as well as numerous online encounters with users via email and an open online meeting platform. Our data collection activities were conducted with the participation of all three researchers, as appropriate and possible. This sample is biased toward long-standing users, who had at least four years of experience with MyKnet.org, and toward non-users who make use of computer-mediated communications and have participated in other K-Net initiatives. The mean age of our combined respondents (28 years) also exceeds the mean age of the communities. This sample is therefore not
meant to be representative of the general population of MyKnet.org users or non-users but is instead made up of “key informants” (Millen 2000) who possess an *emic* understanding of their socio-cultural milieu, in this case K-Net initiatives and/or MyKnet.org and its embeddedness in the context of Northern Ontario First Nations life.

Concurrent with data collection activities, and more extensively once data collection was completed, we independently reviewed interview notes in order to summarize themes and findings, while also taking into account the existing knowledge gained from previous fieldwork, interviews, or community interactions. Adopting an iterative process of analysis, we identified themes in order to “bring together components or fragments of ideas or experiences, which often are meaningless when viewed alone” (Leininger 1985, 60). We also engaged with new questions and issues that emerged so that these might guide ongoing data collection (Miles and Huberman 1994). This process led us to expand our reach in interviews, as described above. As we met repeatedly to further review and refine our findings, we also returned to interviewees or other community members, as needed, to check our understandings and interpretations of the data.

**TOWARD A FRAMEWORK FOR STUDYING MYKNET.ORG**

As we set out to examine MyKnet.org, we felt it was important to situate our work within an historical appreciation of Aboriginal and First Nations media. As our research proceeded, this grounding proved valuable in helping us explore MyKnet.org’s embeddedness. While writings on Aboriginal media helped us understand the cultural aspects of MyKnet.org and its uses, as well as the desire of First Nations individuals to develop their online social environment, the practicalities of such development were left unexplained. In an effort to better understand how such an online social environment came to exist within its specific contexts, we therefore draw upon the notion of a computerization movement.

**MyKnet.org as a Computerization Movement**

According to Kling and Iacono (1988, 228), the concept of a computerization movement refers to efforts to use “computer-based systems as instruments to bring about a new social order.” They argue that “computerization movements are based upon collaborations of participants with diverse interests” (229). Our account of MyKnet.org’s development considers it to be part of a computerization movement that connects local and national interests.

The phase in which MyKnet.org emerged, when much of K-Net’s core broadband network infrastructure was being built, coincided with the
Canadian government’s national focus on “Connecting Canadians” to the Internet. (See Fiser and Clement’s historical account in chapter 14.) Most of the initiatives that K-Net’s alliance of First Nations undertook to develop their network infrastructure and applications benefitted from federal investments in provincial, regional, and local computerization movements, to implement computer technology as a means of bridging social and technological divides in Canada (Fiser, Clement, and Walmark 2006). A central component of any computerization movement concerns the many decisions that are made about control and use of technology during the development process (Kling and Iacono 1988). At each step of K-Net and MyKnet.org’s development, choices about appropriate investment and control over equipment and expertise were made within the communities. As such, on a regional level the development of K-Net and MyKnet.org can be seen as part of an Indigenous computerization movement lead by local leaders in the First Nations communities. These leaders—from First Nations councils, economic development agencies, education and health authorities, and civic groups—collaborated with the intent not only to implement computer technology but also to adopt and adapt that technology to the local needs of their communities. For example, as we discuss below, they focused youth training and educational opportunities to complement the physical network infrastructure’s development. Thus, counter to arguments that view computerization in terms of a simple market formula of “cost-effective computing tools,” Kling and Iacono (1988) and the experiences of Keewaytinook Okimakanak (KO) Tribal Council and its collaborators suggest that the acquisition, installation, and adoption of computers and information and communication technologies (ICTs) depend on an equally important array of non-economic choices.

MyKnet.org as a Community-Driven Online Social Environment

While we interpret MyKnet.org’s development as part of an Indigenous computerization movement with strong ties to both local and national interests, we also recognize that MyKnet.org is a unique online social environment that has been directly shaped by the interactions of its individual users, who extend their social ties online.

One of the common reasons that prompt Indigenous peoples, groups, and organizations to create an online presence is “to provide information from a viewpoint that may not have found a voice in the mainstream media” (Cisler 1997). Indigenous communities have made early inroads on the World Wide Web. The Oneida First Nation of New York state, for instance, mounted the first Indigenous-owned website in spring 1994, well before the home page of the White House went online (Polly 1997), and the Blackfeet Confederacy
in Alberta established the first Aboriginal Canadian web presence one year later (Prins 2002).

The individual contributions that shape these online social environments may take a variety of forms. Landzelius (2003, 2006a) refers to the “self-authored engagements” of Indigenous peoples online as “Indigenous cyberactivism” and distinguishes between “outreach” and “inreach” activities. In this case cyberactivism may not only encompass but also transcend narrowly political communications. Indigenous outreach initiatives include public relations and tourism management, sovereignty campaigns, liberation movements, and common-cause partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups. However, we have found that MyKnet.org focuses more heavily on Indigenous inreach activities, which are oriented toward an internal public and include activities such as public services (e-health and e-learning, for example), as well as personalized social networking practices such as communications directed between families and friends. As we elaborate in our discussion below, this inreach focus points to the importance of MyKnet.org as a locally developed and owned online social environment, which stands in contrast to mainstream online social network sites such as Facebook.

MyKnet.org as an Extension of Indigenous Media Production in Northern Ontario

The First Nations’ use of Internet technologies, though a development of new media corresponding to Landzelius’s concept of cyberactivism, resonates with older media practices within the greater context of Indigenous media production. During the 1970s, several First Nations newspapers and newsletters came into existence across Canada, following the release of the 1969 White Paper on Indian policy. In Northern Ontario, the multilingual Wawatay News was published for the first time in 1973, providing the First Nations communities of the region with news in English, Ojibwe, Oji-Cree, and Cree syllabics.

Most of the money for media production came from the federal Native Communication Program, which was also established in 1973 (see Avison and Meadows 2000). However, when the Canadian government cut funding in 1990, some newspapers were forced to cease publishing, while others, such as Wawatay News, became more commercial and now include advertisements at the cost of other content (Demay 1993).

Together with Wawatay News, the Wawatay Native Communications Society established a community radio system for Northern Ontario’s First Nations. The first community radio station was established in 1974, and, in 1986, the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) licensed the Wawatay Radio Network, which provides programming in Oji-Cree and Cree language. Particularly in the northernmost communities, where Native languages continue to be spoken by a majority of residents,
the radio network’s programs have reached up to 80 percent of local populations (Karam and Zuckernick 1992). However, community radio broadcasts now compete with satellite television and the Internet, which are particularly dominated by the English language, and there are fears that audiences have diminished.

Following the launch of the Anik satellites at the end of the 1970s, several Aboriginal broadcasters, such as the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation, started to provide Native-language programming (see, for example, Baltruschat 2004; Roth 2005). In 1983, the Northern Broadcasting Policy and the Northern Native Broadcast Program created the basis for a northern satellite distribution system, which eventually resulted in the launch of Television Northern Canada (TVNC) in 1991. In 1999, the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN) was launched, after TVCN was approved for a national broadcast license. APTN blends multilingual programming on Aboriginal cultures, lives, traditions, and histories with news and public affairs in a mainstream broadcasting style. It also depends on local and regional Aboriginal media producers, such as Wawatay, for content. Despite the existence of this vital network, approximately 35 percent of Aboriginal people living on reserves, particularly in the North, still do not receive APTN programming (Roth 2005). At the same time, APTN, while Aboriginal-controlled and Aboriginal-focused, must attempt to represent Canada’s vast Aboriginal experience, thus diluting the potential for locally controlled and community-focused media.

Following the inroads of Indigenous newsprint, radio, and television up to the mid-1990s, Canadian Indigenous groups began to mobilize for improved access to telecommunications facilities and the establishment of Internet infrastructure. In Northern Ontario, Wawatay and KO Tribal Council’s K-Net Services spearheaded a movement for improved telecom services that paved the way for K-Net’s introduction of broadband services in 2000 (see chapter 14). First Nations across Northern Ontario had input into Wawatay and the KO Tribal Council’s regional campaign, and awareness was raised around the feasibility and usefulness of Internet applications such as email and personal home pages. This legacy directly shaped MyKnet.org’s online social environment when it appeared on the Web in 2000.

**Development of MyKnet.org:**
**An Indigenous Computerization Movement**

In 1994, staff members of the Keewaytinook Okimakanak Tribal Council, which represented seven (later to become six) remote fly-in First Nations, organized an experimental bulletin board system (BBS) for their communities. This was the beginning of the Kuh-ke-nah Network (K-Net), an amalgam of
Oji-Cree and English meaning “everybody’s network.” As part of its nascent computerization movement, KO configured the K-Net BBS to support a Stay in School project in the First Nations. The goal of the movement was to create a computer-mediated communications link between the First Nations and their high-school-aged youth who, in seeking higher education, had to board in Pelican Falls, a residential school for First Nations near the town and service-hub of Sioux Lookout. The BBS presented an innovative solution to a serious telecommunications problem: some communities only had one public payphone, placed outside the community’s band office. Others had to rely on trail radio for communications. Few, if any, had access to computers.

The KO communities are among over fifty First Nations in a territory that the CRTC designates as a high-cost serving area, and market forces alone have failed to support their telecommunications needs (Fiser, Clement, and Walmark 2006). Similarly, the diffusion of computers and related ICTs in the territory depends on grassroots initiatives and public-private sector partnerships. To establish the BBS as a communications link between the First Nations, Pelican Falls, and Sioux Lookout, the KO Tribal Council had to build a computer-communications infrastructure from the ground up. They thus constituted a localized computerization movement, focused on finding ways to use technology to support and meet the needs of the local communities.

The experiences of the KO Tribal Council and its collaborators reflect the argument of Kling and Iacono (1988) that the acquisition, installation, and adoption of computers and ICTs depends on an array of non-economic forces, rather than simply cost-effectiveness. With K-Net, a core group of community leaders worked with First Nations members and interested parties from local education, health, and community service fields to build a business case for Internet access and later broadband. As more and more local interests came to share their vision of an Indigenous network, the KO Tribal Council and its allies brokered public-private sector partnerships to develop their network, built around the principles of a not-for-profit organization and co-operative enterprise. Notably, education has been a major component of the network. K-Net staff have worked hard to impart a technology curriculum, or culture of use, in the communities (Beaton, Fiddler, and Rowlandson 2004) by providing workshops for users to experiment with computers and by supporting individual community champions to manage and organize public access to computing through local institutions such as band offices, e-centres, and schools. By 1996, 730 users in twenty-one First Nations communities of Northwestern Ontario had access to the K-Net BBS. What was initially the Stay in School project rapidly became a regional communications medium for adults and youth alike, despite being limited by a text-based, low-bandwidth device.
There was no access to the World Wide Web offered by K-Net during this period, and all of the online connections went through dial-up. Despite slow download speeds, users were creating and linking personal profiles, sharing messages, writing stories and jokes, discussing current events, posting notices and ads, learning about computing, and more. Some of the very remote communities that participated, such as North Spirit Lake and Keewaywin, had no direct access to K-Net, but they acquired computers, and KO periodically airmailed floppy disks between the communities and the BBS server to update the messages, demonstrating the commitment organizers had to serving local communities and using technology to facilitate community development and communication.

Reflecting the K-Net computerization movement as a broad-based initiative driven by community needs, as well as its connection to a broader national computerization movement, from 1997 to 2000 KO partnered with Industry Canada’s First Nations SchoolNet, Telesat Canada, and the Stentor Alliance to install DirecPC technology in First Nations elementary schools and some off-reserve high schools (Fiser 2004). In 1997, KO also began to receive support from Industry Canada’s Community Access Program (CAP) to establish public access sites in K-Net communities across Northwestern Ontario. Coupled with the SchoolNet program and support from regional and provincial partners, CAP enabled K-Net communities to leverage school connectivity for public access and hire local coordinators. As KO facilitated the SchoolNet initiative and the development of CAP sites in each community, its staff members travelled around Northern Ontario to deliver workshops on computing, web page development, and basic Internet skills (from 1997 to 1999), as well as providing ongoing online training and support over the K-Net BBS, thereby building local capacities.

It was during this period that MyKnet.org’s web-based precursors emerged. The web-based graphical interface of the BBS (as it existed in 1998) enabled K-Net to serve community portals and home pages. The earliest home pages were strictly HTML and service oriented. KO staff created initial templates and embedded them within a tutorial designed to facilitate self-directed learning. Most learning was undertaken by community members on their own initiative, online, at the public access sites. To this end, KO staff dedicated much personal effort to building online support systems, chat rooms, tutorials, bulletin boards, listservs, and so on.

In 2001, K-Net became one of Industry Canada’s SMART demonstration projects (see Ramírez et al. 2003). This project would catalyze K-Net’s evolution into a regional wide area network (WAN) and Internet service provider. Support leveraged from project partners, including Industry Canada, FedNor, and the Northern Ontario Heritage Fund, enabled KO to order T1 services (1.544Mbps)
for four of the KO communities and to establish a shared, high-speed satellite service for its most remote community, Fort Severn. The K-Net BBS was retired, and MyKnet.org acquired its own domain name and dedicated server.

A year later, the Fort Severn satellite initiative led KO to partner with Telesat Canada R&D and Industry Canada to initiate the C-Band Public Benefits Transponder agreement (Keewaytinook Okimakanak Research Institute 2005). A logical complement to the SMART initiative, the C-Band satellite service would help deliver broadband applications in twelve remote First Nations in Northern Ontario that could not otherwise acquire network services. With broadband, residential Internet access finally became a feasible project in the region, although public access e-centres and schools continue to be the primary access points for MyKnet.org end-users in the region. The ensuing years, up to the present, have seen K-Net expand broadband services in partnership with forty other remote communities.

Owing to the high cost of network services in remote areas, limited bandwidth is an ongoing management issue, especially for users over K-Net’s satellite network, which services forty-four communities. As part of a community-based network, MyKnet.org users have to negotiate uptime with regularly scheduled high-capacity applications such as video conferencing and telemedicine. The increasing use of audio and video on MyKnet.org home pages led to a 2006 decision by K-Net staff to institute a daily quota, in order to manage community bandwidth. Other than to support higher-capacity community-based applications, K-Net does not regulate the type of content created on the MyKnet.org server. However, to ensure that MyKnet.org does not disrupt services such as video conferencing and telemedicine, especially in the K-Net satellite communities, staff evaluate pages and disk usage and temporarily suspend high-bandwidth-consuming pages until services are rendered.

It is important to recognize that MyKnet.org emerged out of a national computerization movement on the part of the Canadian government, which provided programs and funding for much of the technological implementation in the region. However, its development within a local computerization movement in the region that was (and is) focused on local education, local ownership and control of media, and the development of local capacities, particularly among youth, is central to its understanding by users and community members. MyKnet.org is seen as belonging to the community and, as the discussion below highlights, is used in various ways as a means of supporting local communication, networking, and community building.
MYKNET.ORG AND ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKING

Social networking websites, typically defined as websites on which users create personal profiles and network with others through online tools (Barnes 2006; Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe 2006), have become increasingly popular in recent years, with large commercial websites attracting interest in popular media (Lewis 2006; Rawe 2006) and the most popular websites boasting millions of users (Stone 2005). However, as scholars have noted, the networking aspects of such websites are not new, and other forms of Internet communication, including instant messaging, home pages, and blogs, involve aspects of social networking (boyd 2004; Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe 2006). Although MyKnet.org does not technically resemble popular social networking websites, most notably because it is made up of interlinked home pages and does not formally encourage users to create networks of “friends,” it is similar in many ways, particularly in its function and use. MyKnet.org is, for many First Nations members of the Nan communities, an important tool for presenting oneself and communicating with others in locally meaningful ways.

While literature on Internet communication has extensively explored the ways in which various online tools and environments facilitate (or complicate) social networking among peers and strangers (see, for example, Wellman and Haythornthwaite 2002), literature on social networking websites has tended to emphasize popular commercial enterprises, such as MySpace and Facebook. MyKnet.org is, in contrast, locally developed and locally controlled and operates on a not-for-profit basis, and its development in many ways prefigured the growth of popular social networking websites. Unlike those websites, however, the focus of MyKnet.org on building and strengthening particular kinship and community ties is central to its existence and use.

MYKNET.ORG AS COMMUNITY-BASED AND COMMUNITY-FOCUSED MEDIA TECHNOLOGY

The relationship between media and community is closely connected to the development and diffusion of communication technologies. From newspaper to the Internet, every new medium has been credited with the “possibility of regenerating community through mediated forms of communication” (Jankowski 2006, 55). Research into community media can be traced back to the beginning of the twentieth century, when newspapers and radio were analyzed for their contributions to community building. In the 1970s and 1980s, case studies focusing on new electronic media, such as video and cable television, investigated the potential of community media for political and cultural
activism as well as their interrelations with social capital (see Jankowski 2006 for a review of the literature). Community media studies turned to the Internet in the 1990s. Almost every published volume on the socio-cultural aspects of the Internet discussed community construction, often in connection to identity formation in and through new media technology (Benedikt 1991; Jones 1995, 1997; Rheingold 1993; Smith and Kollock 1999). While the bulk of this literature has concentrated on online communities and their characteristics, other projects have investigated what has been termed the digital divide. Referring to the unequally distributed access to ICTs, this concept is epistemologically linked to the concept of haves and have-nots. This is why community informatics, for instance, focuses on what Gurstein (2003) calls “the effective use” of ICTs, including their implementation and use in specific geographically based community contexts (see also Gurstein 2000 and the introduction to the present volume). As recent studies on ICTs and community (see, for example, Haythornthwaite and Kendall 2010) indicate, information technologies such as the Internet can be used to reinforce and regenerate geographically based communities and identities.

In the remote First Nations communities of Northern Ontario, media services develop more slowly, but, as our respondents stated, any new medium that is made available will be used provided community members have enough control to make it work for their purposes. MyKnet.org is taking its place among other community media in the region, in some ways acting as a substitute for the telephone, which was, owing to a lack of infrastructure, never widely used among the communities. In other ways, MyKnet.org functions like community radio—present in the region since the 1970s—but with a younger audience and user group at the helm. Community radio broadcasts mainly in Native languages (Cree, Oji-Cree, and Ojibwe), and its audience consists primarily of older community members (those over 40 years of age), whereas younger people in many of the communities do not speak these languages as fluently as their elders and thus find English-language media more accessible. Some respondents compared MyKnet.org to community radio, particularly as both are locally driven and locally operated initiatives, and both provide access for individual community members to participate and make their voices heard. While access and language issues caused our respondents to be cautious about claiming that MyKnet.org is as broadly accessible to First Nations as community radio, they made it clear that both media are important to community members specifically because they are considered to be owned and shaped by the communities themselves (unlike satellite television, for example).

Like community radio, MyKnet.org connects individuals within communities, but it also enables connections across communities. We heard a
number of stories about the possibilities for communication among frequent MyKnet.org users. We were told particularly of parents who use MyKnet.org to locate their children when they travel abroad, or even within the local communities. In one story we heard, parents asked their older daughter where her sister was going to be that night, and the older daughter went onto her sister’s MyKnet.org home page to discover her location. Our respondents told us that these were not uncommon patterns of use.

Such purposeful searches of MyKnet.org are facilitated by daily patterns of home page use (updating and reading), supported by a K-Net policy that requires MyKnet.org users to register accounts under their surname and given names. Coupled with this policy, the uniqueness of surnames in Northern Ontario First Nations turns MyKnet.org into a dynamic map of kinship ties in the region. We were told that Native users who understand the correspondences between surnames, territories, and communities can use MyKnet.org to follow the movements of their peers and relations across the region. We also heard stories about distant family relations becoming reunited through MyKnet.org, including estranged family members scattered across provinces and remote/urban divides. As Arnold and Plymire (2004) have argued, Aboriginal online activities can be important means for cultural communities to keep in touch and to maintain a sense of community despite changing geographic locations. In its uses by community members, MyKnet.org is playing just such a role, as home pages are used extensively to keep in touch with friends, family, and colleagues (Budka 2009).

MyKnet.org home pages cover the entire community lifecycle, announcing births, graduations, marriages, separations, and deaths. MyKnet.org communities post their own home pages to advertise local events, and local programs, associations, and sports teams create pages to keep the public informed about their activities. Aside from personal miscellany, individuals use home pages to promote business, arts, spiritual beliefs, and teachings from the land.

Unforeseen events also become woven into the fabric of MyKnet.org. One of our respondents told us of the time she learned of a fire in a neighbouring community by reading a friend’s home page. News of the fire spread across MyKnet.org, and within a few days there was a movement, coordinated largely over MyKnet.org, to provide relief to the effected community. Other disasters, such as teen suicides, have led to memorials and public information bulletins on MyKnet.org. Respondents told us that some community members have been known to monitor their local youths’ home pages for signs of depression and have staged interventions on a number of occasions. In such ways, MyKnet.org fulfills an important role not only in strengthening familial and friendship ties but also in facilitating intercommunity communication, civic action, and other interpersonal connections. Uses of MyKnet.org that focus...
on connecting communities and community members by advertising events or providing information on local organizations, for example, reflect the important inreach activities described by Landzelius (2003, 2006a).

Another part of the community-based and community-focused aspect of MyKnet.org is its non-commercial nature. While mainstream online social network sites, such as Facebook, Beebo, and MySpace, have seen increasing amounts of marketing and advertising on their pages, from marketers gleaning information from profiles to celebrities using the networks for promotion (Barnes 2006), MyKnet.org remains non-commercial and locally focused. On MyKnet.org there is no fear of marketers seeking users online, and the promotion that does take place is by local artisans, musicians, or organizations through their respective home pages.

As a community-based and community-focused medium, MyKnet.org provides an alternative to mainstream commercial online social network sites. The uniqueness of its user pool, along with the kinship and community ties it represents, provides MyKnet.org with an advantage that any competing commercial network would not presently be able to meet. This advantage however, is predicated on sustainable public infrastructure. As Fiser and Clement point out in chapter 14, applications such as MyKnet.org can be free of charge and community based because K-Net has a system of resource sharing and co-operation in place between First Nations, telecom service providers, regional organizations, the Province of Ontario, and the Government of Canada. Given a fiscal climate in which community-focused funding programs, such as the federal Community Access Program and First Nations SchoolNet, have steadily declined in scope, innovative community-based applications such as MyKnet.org are at risk of being undervalued. Nevertheless, our research indicates that local demand for MyKnet.org’s community-based media continues to thrive.

Respondents told us that they identify K-Net and MyKnet.org as part of their community experience, in contrast to other websites and online social environments that they may visit and use. MyKnet.org users are intimately enveloped by the cultural experience of a computerization movement in the Northern Ontario First Nations, such that there is more to MyKnet.org’s appeal than simple communications.

CONCLUSION

This exploratory study of MyKnet.org aims to draw a preliminary map of this rich and fascinating online environment, focusing particularly on the importance of the community-based nature of the network’s development and uses. We encountered much that is worth celebrating in terms of the vitality
of Northern Ontario’s remote First Nations and also discovered some particular areas of caution and uncertainty. While there are many other stories to be told about MyKnet.org, this particular account drew its interpretations from a selected group of key informants: administrators, early innovators, casual users, and non-users who have been actively thinking about what makes MyKnet.org a social networking environment and cultural milieu. Their stories revealed the many ways in which the network is used to build and maintain familial, friendship, and community relationships and how these relationships are structured within and through the realities of the geographical location and demographic makeup of the Northern Ontario First Nations, particularly the peoples of Nishnawbe Aski Nation.

Within the framework of Aboriginal media, MyKnet.org stands out in many ways. Those we spoke to suggest that MyKnet.org is a vibrant social networking site, not by virtue of a narrowly configured web server but by virtue of the practices of its users. No one knows who created the first “shout out” or the first interactive guest book on MyKnet.org, nor can our respondents say for certain who started the first daily blog or listing of community events or who created the first tribute to a deceased loved one, and so forth. What they know is that such functions are now integral to users’ MyKnet.org experience and contribute to their community life. For observers of MyKnet.org it is clear that local experiences of life in the First Nations contribute to shaping and connecting the MyKnet.org home pages (see Miller and Slater 2002).

Moreover, within the context of global Indigenous Internet usage, MyKnet.org and its many creators and users demonstrate that “historically marginalized peoples are not only taking roles, but in certain respects taking the lead, as savvy, technoscientific actors themselves ‘colonizing’ global media channels and converting them into fertile habitats for the exercise of identity and voice across distance” (Landzelius 2006b, 300). The passion of local leaders and their ability to develop a local computerization movement within a national movement to “connect Canadians” clearly drove the implementation of computer technology in the region and helped to shape the uses of the technology that facilitate intercommunity communication as well as personal development.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
We would like to acknowledge the financial support of the Canadian Research Alliance for Community Innovation and Networking (CRACIN) and the University of Vienna, as well as the research support provided by K-Net and the Keewaytinook Okimakanak Research Institute. Sincere thanks to all of our research participants for sharing their insights and stories.
NOTES
1 See section 2 of the Indian Act, R.S., 1985, c. 1–5, http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/I-5/page-1.html. The term First Nation is not synonymous with Aboriginal. Canada’s Aboriginal population also includes the Inuit and the Métis.
2 We were guided by a draft of KORI’s Community Consultation Standards, available at the time at http://research.knet.ca/?q=system/files/07-06-08_Community%20Consultation%20Guidelines_o.pdf, although this document has since been taken down. For current information, see http://www.ccednet-rcdec.ca/en/node/9535.
3 E-centres are local public-access facilities, usually housed in or near a community Band Office or school, that provide multimedia PCs and Internet access free of charge to residents and visitors. Periodically, staff members offer relevant workshops.
4 In respect of our participants’ privacy, we have chosen to keep our discussions anonymous.
5 The communities are Deer Lake, Fort Severn, Kasabonika, Keewaywin, North Spirit Lake, and Poplar Hill. A seventh community, McDowell Lake (population 51) is a seasonal settlement without a school. Kasabonika left the tribal council in 1998.

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