Despite widely acknowledged similarities between community networks and public libraries, there are also challenges and constraints that hinder the potential for future synergies. Public libraries have a long-standing tradition of involvement with their communities, yet their circumstances and concerns differ from those of community networks (CNs). The mission of libraries is often rather narrowly focused and, when it comes to dealing with individuals and other organizations, their procedures can be somewhat rigid. In turn, CN practitioners, while institutionally more flexible, are sometimes too quick to dismiss the role of public libraries in the community, tending to view the library simply as a repository of books backed by public funding. Although both CNs and libraries are concerned with providing information services to the public, a dialogue seems to be lacking between the two communities.

In this chapter, we aim to contribute to an understanding of the areas of intersection between CNs and libraries, particularly in Canada, where specific public policies have contributed to shaping the playing field. With reference both to the existing literature and to the CRACIN case study sites, we examine the barriers to collaboration between CNs and libraries, and, in a few cases, the successes achieved by forging a relationship between the two. The main questions that drive our enquiry concern the ways in which public libraries...
and CNs compare in terms of their ideals and practices, whether there are identifiable dimensions along which to compare the synergies and tensions, and what the prospects are for new forms of partnering between libraries and CNs. The last requires an examination of the conditions under which such partnering is likely to occur, as well as a consideration of possible incompatibilities and, if such exist, how they might be mitigated.

As both information scholars and members of the CRACIN team, we were in a position to bring a distinctive perspective to bear on this research, and we aimed to do so with open minds in order to better understand the similarities and differences between libraries and CNs. However, the CNs that were the subject of CRACIN case studies were not chosen on the basis of any pre-existing connections with libraries, and in some cases the connections were very limited. All the same, over time, we were able to arrive at useful insights about the ways in which these two parties interacted (or not).

We set out to examine this relationship by reviewing the relevant literatures for evidence concerning the types and the scope of involvement between libraries and CNs. In her foundational work in this area, Stevenson (2008) describes two approaches to public access computing in Canada—that of community networking and community informatics (CN/CI), on the one hand, and of public librarianship and library and information science (PL/LIS), on the other—and compared the two in terms of their respective political engagement and scholarly research agendas. She calls attention, in particular, to their shared concern with “universal access to information and communication technologies,” noting that “both communities recognize that, as a social problem, the digital divide extends beyond simple access” (Stevenson 2008, 19). In this chapter, we compare the two communities more broadly, in terms of their shared ideals and values, their financial resources and accountability models, and their approaches to outreach and the provision of services.

**SHARED IDEALS AND VALUES**

Despite differing developmental trajectories, CNs and public libraries have similarities that include their grassroots origins as well as their ideals and values when it comes to serving their constituencies. Among these values are an affirmation of the importance of public education, lifelong learning, affordable access to information and ICTs, and individual empowerment. In addition, both serve to provide social, public, and civic spaces (see table 17.1).

The library as a social, public, and civic space can be traced back to its early development in North America. Since their inception in the mid-nineteenth century, public libraries have been thought of as “public goods,” sharing
with public schools the mission of supporting education (Valentine 2005). Principles of intellectual freedom formed part of the core values of libraries, which encouraged citizens to take an active role in democracy by providing access to public information resources and creating spaces that foster citizenship and community participation. These values translate into modern-day public library practices that support lifelong learning, including the public library’s focus on community information services, Internet support, educational support, and literacy programs. Despite their popular branding as the “temple of the book,” libraries are places of engagement, bringing people together (via reference desk encounters, book clubs, study circles, and so on), as well as sites of learning, where users have access to information, research, and knowledge (Fisher et al. 2007). In promoting values of access, equity, and diversity to all members of the community, the public library is a potentially vital contributor to the social economy, a sector that is primarily concerned with building community and with achieving overarching social goals (Canada 2004; Quarter 1992).

**TABLE 17.1  Similarities between libraries and community networks**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Environment</th>
<th>Social, public, and civic spaces</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Use of ICTs and provision of ICT resources and services</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connection to geographic community</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention to community needs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skill in volunteer management</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis on outreach activities and partnership building</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ideals and values</th>
<th>Grassroots origins</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support for public education, equity, diversity, and access to information</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for lifelong learning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support for affordable public access to the Internet</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Potentially vital contributors to the social economy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis on fostering social capital and attention to issues of social inclusion</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotion of reading and literacy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Obstacles</th>
<th>Economic pressures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Competition for consumers’ attention</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduced and/or unreliable government funding</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Typically, community networks are also rooted in a specific geographic location (Carroll and Rosson 2003), in some cases serving as a physical space that fosters social interaction and inclusion through face-to-face encounters with other CN users and volunteers. However, community networks offer more than low-cost public access to the Internet. In the United States, community networks grew out of the “community organizing” movement that
developed into a particular strand of activism in the 1970s and drew its agenda from geographically based communities. The idea of “marrying geographic community-based activism with ICTs” was at the origin of the development of CNs (Kubicek and Wagner 2002).

Like CNs, public libraries also developed as part of a grassroots movement, but one that began nearly a century earlier. In many cases, free public libraries started as rural township and women’s social libraries. Valentine (2005) points to the central role that local women played in establishing hundreds of public libraries across the United States, in effect producing grassroots organizations that became part of and helped to produce local community narratives. In the 1970s, the growing need for community information resources and services led public libraries to find new ways to actively engage with their communities. They initially developed paper-based databases of community information, providing the public with referrals to social service agencies and other community resources (Durrance 1984). These community information services (CIS) later became networked and were eventually made publicly available online. Public libraries’ grassroots connections to community seem to have shifted over the years, likely because of such factors as their formal institutional status and the evolving role of accredited library professionals.

Through the myriad of services offered, ranging from the provision of information to encouraging dialogue among community members and beyond, libraries and CNs have an important role to play in fostering social capital, promoting reading and literacy, and addressing issues of social inclusion. Given the clear parallels between public libraries and CNs in terms of responding to community needs for local information, resources and services, and despite calls for them to work more closely together (Bajjaly 1999; Cisler 1994; Das 1999; Durrance and Schneider 1996; Schuler n.d.), it is surprising to note that formal collaborations between public libraries and CNs are typically more the exception than the rule. For example, in 1999, a nationwide survey of American public library directors showed that only 14 percent of public libraries had relationships with CNs (Durrance and Pettigrew 2002). Despite this, many CNs owe their origins to some form of collaboration with public libraries (Mattison 1994).

As early as the 1970s, there were documented instances of public libraries collaborating with CNs, the best-known example being the Community Memory project in Berkeley, California, one of the earliest known community access networks (Cisler 1994). In 1973, the first community networking experiment in Canada involved the installation in the front lobby of the Vancouver Public Library of a terminal providing access to an online database of community and social service listings.
In Canada, the infusion of funding in the mid-1990s through the federal government’s Community Access Program (CAP) aimed to create community-based Internet access points and marked the beginning of much library-CN collaboration. In 1997, a Canada-wide study of Internet connectivity in county and regional libraries found that 67 percent provided public Internet access, which was a dramatic increase from 3 percent in 1995 (Curry and Curtis 2000).

It is unclear how many of the libraries surveyed were involved in formal partnerships with CNs. Yet it may be telling that almost 50 percent of respondents reported that volunteers, such as community networkers, helped to train the public to use the Internet in public libraries. Former president of the Canadian Library Association Wendy Newman asserts that in the early to mid-1990s, libraries had technical expertise not found elsewhere in the community sector in Canada, especially in small towns and rural communities, because of their experience in developing electronic catalogues. However, libraries’ participation in community networking was often quite invisible because of the informal nature of those partnerships and relationships (Wendy Newman, pers. comm., 26 April 2010). Consequently, it has been difficult to assess the extent to which public libraries, librarians, and CNs and community practitioners initiate, develop, and sustain collaboration and working relationships (Pettigrew, Durrance, and Vakkari 1999).

Despite their commonalities, there are various key elements that distinguish CNs from public libraries and that in some cases may act as deterrents to co-operation. Differences are visible in the areas of funding resources and accountability mechanisms, outreach and community development, and professional development and other staffing issues, as well as in differing orientations toward ICTs, all of which have influenced the developmental trajectories of CNs and public libraries (see table 17.2). We examine a few of these issues below.

**Financial Resources and Accountability Models**

Financial resources and accountability models are two elements that public libraries and CNs have to contend with on an ongoing basis. Libraries, while they may be chronically underfunded, tend to have more funding opportunities and more stability than CNs, thanks to their formal institutional structure. CNs are much more precarious, as their funding is dependent on such factors as shifting political agendas. (For further discussion, see chapter 19.) In some cases, the result can be collaboration between CNs and libraries; in other cases, it can lead to rivalry and competition for meagre funds. For example, in the United States, the funding structure for both public libraries and CNs in the 1990s incited “turf wars” about which group would best serve the public (Cisler 1994).
**Table 17.2 Divergences between libraries and community networks**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Public libraries</th>
<th>CNs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Funding</td>
<td>“Social utility and public good”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Public good” status and associated public funding</td>
<td>Precarious funding structure largely dependent on political will</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainability ensured but not always on par with needs (rising costs of serials, licensing fees, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Institutional structure</strong></td>
<td><strong>Local systems, run by local people and organizations, utilizing local resources to meet local communications, educational, social, and economic needs (Shade 1999)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highly formalized bureaucratic structure (municipal institutions, enacted by bylaws, library boards, etc.)</td>
<td>Flexible, responsive, ad hoc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutional status support mechanisms</td>
<td>Geographic community-based activism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional staff, unionized</td>
<td>Civic spaces that lie somewhere between government and the private sector</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Membership required (through library card)</td>
<td>Reliance on volunteer efforts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for staff to be proactive and reflective in their practice (Durrance, Fisher, and Hinton 2005)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Need for strategies to anticipate and respond to neighbourhood needs (Durrance, Fisher, and Hinton 2005)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Practices</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICTs prevalent, but emphasis is on the role-based model of libraries and librarians</td>
<td>ICTs as key to the very existence of the CN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal skill set: ability to organize and catalog information for more effective retrieval</td>
<td>Primary concern is with the community (e.g., shared problems, collective empowerment)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary concern is with the individual (“ideologies of individualism,” Stevenson 2008)</td>
<td>Lack of full-time skilled individuals, reliance on volunteers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The book as a central “object” associated with the library and its practices</td>
<td>Can be technologically focused and thus exclusionary (Powell 2007)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tendency to make the marginalized more like the mainstream (generic user)</td>
<td>Traditional support of political and social reform not reflected in current user base</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis on in-person support</td>
<td>Informal, with opportunities for involvement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value of “neutrality” as a professional norm</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absence of a model for engagement with community and for providing civic information</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community comes to the library</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ultimately, many public libraries were beneficiaries of funding initiatives to bridge the so-called digital divide, which led to increased collaborations between libraries, service providers, and other local groups including CNs. But, as Cisler (1994, 24) observes, public libraries were slow to realize that effective relationships in the community often meant “collaboration with groups and individuals who may know little about libraries and whose agenda may not fit the style of some libraries.”

The first Cns in Canada were established in 1992, in the form of the Victoria Free-Net and National Capital FreeNet, both modelled after the Cleveland Freenet. By 1998, there were sixty FreeNets across Canada (O’Brien 2001), many of which still rely on Industry Canada’s Community Access Program (CAP) funding as their primary source of funding. Public libraries also figured prominently in CAP as sites of public access and training for the public. In some cases, CAP funding allowed already existing Cns to expand (e.g., by increasing their number of computer terminals). It must be noted, however, that some public librarians felt that the government had simply “downloaded responsibility to libraries, without much planning or practical consultation of the actual delivery” (Anderson and Julien 2003, 13).

As for Cns, their paradox is that although they gained charitable status as a “social utility and public good” in 1996, this decision sharply contrasted with Canadian federal policy makers’ vision of “national information infrastructures as existing in a privatized and deregulated environment” (Shade 1999). Shade notes that because Cns in Canada are civic spaces that lie somewhere between government and the private sector, one ongoing challenge for Cns is the risk of their place being eroded as a result of a lack of funding and the absence of a model that clearly distinguishes them from commercial competitors and securely roots them in the “local.” Stevenson (2008, 12–13) observes:

As a result of nationwide funding initiatives such as CAP, public libraries and community networks/centres have become discursively linked as public sites for access to and training on the new information and communication technologies. As well, both have been consistently constituted as important social safety nets for the “digitally divided” in Canada. . . . Given their differing genealogies, it is not surprising that these similarities have more to do with the discursive practices associated with public policy initiatives (applications for funding, site reports) than anything inherent to either community.

Other issues that contributed to an uneven playing field between public libraries and Cns include the fact that many funding initiatives did not recognize Cns as legitimate community organizations, targeting instead more formal institutions. Strover et al. (2004) and others have criticized the fact that, for
example, in the United States the definition of public spaces is largely restricted
to a focus on schools and libraries, which don’t always meet community needs
in the most effective manner, in terms of their hours of operation, the con-
stituencies they reach, and so on. According to Strover et al. (2004, 483), “the
very placement, staffing, and use of public access in [libraries and schools]
largely replicated the power structure and access advantages that already were
in place.” Consequently, while the institutional status of public libraries iden-
tified them as worthy recipients of funds to support access to computers and
the Internet, it was a mixed blessing with regard to engendering relationships
with other community organizations, including CNS.

Libraries, like other institutions, encounter barriers in meeting the needs
of their constituencies. The usual culprits include funding, staffing, sustain-
bility, and the setting of priorities. For example, public libraries are viewed
as vital contributors to the Canadian social economy, yet, because they have
traditionally relied on public funding, they do not fit into this framework as
businesses. In the past decades, libraries have increasingly faced pressures
to respond to prevailing ideological shifts, most notably toward a “market-
led” approach to the provision of services that calls for increasing efficiency
(Buschman 2005; Durrance and Fisher 2003; Greenhalgh, Worpole, and
Landry 1995), as well as related economic pressures from government. Service
delivery and performance indicators were implemented, along with evalua-
tion frameworks, in an effort to make the libraries more accountable and
responsive to political requirements. The large bookstores also increased com-
petition for consumers’ attention, as did the advent of ICTs (digital content
and services, social networking platforms, etc.), which have forced libraries
to adapt themselves as organizations as well as to adapt their services in
order to respond to these new challenges and opportunities. Like institutions
in other sectors, to gain public and political support for increased funding,
libraries have had to reexamine their role in the knowledge society, while
also keeping up with the services that they have traditionally provided to
their constituencies. The emphasis on managing their assets and identify-
ing their competitive advantages in a knowledge economy—and the related
business-like discourse—likely reflects the tensions that libraries face in purs-
uing their traditional mandates during a period of neoliberal ascendancy.
Increasingly, libraries find themselves pulled between these measurements
of productivity and performance and their involvement with grassroots
community organizations and community networking. In that, they share
similarities with CNS.

CNS have also been forced to deal with economic forces beyond their con-
trol. In the 1990s, the Web introduced competition in the form of commercial
community information services. Carroll and Rosson (2003) observe that,
during this period, CNs became less interactive and less community oriented. Where once the CN was locally hosted and managed with a focus on communication—through bulletin board systems and newsgroups, electronic discussion boards, and email—CNs increasingly became more like websites, thus competing with commercial providers. Further, the authors argue, the advent of social software and computer-supported co-operative work (the Web 2.0 environment) raised the bar for CNs since their users often expect to be able to interact online. According to Carroll and Rosson and others, what continues to distinguish CNs is their connection to geographic community. As such, CNs are often exhorted to incorporate models of place, to foster sociability, and to incorporate aspects of lifelong learning—all of which, in our minds, represents a clear connection with public libraries.

Outreach and Provision of Services
Libraries and CNs both perform a considerable amount of outreach activity and partnership building. Through their joined efforts, the external community is invigorated, and, as McCabe (2001, 116) writes, “Such a structure for collaboration will allow powerful new strategies for solving community problems to emerge.” But there are limits to the nature and scope of involvement of both libraries and CNs in community initiatives.

Much has been written about the ability of libraries to foster social capital within the communities they serve, although few empirical studies have been produced to support this claim (Johnson 2009, 2010; McCook 2000). Established through relationships among and between individuals, groups, and organizations, social capital involves five key elements, as outlined in a report prepared by Middlesex University’s Institute of Social Science Research: trust, reciprocity and mutuality, social networks, shared norms of behaviour, and a sense of commitment and belonging (European Commission 2003). In turn, these elements may foster a sense of community, establish identity, and encourage the practices of a civil society (Côté 2001; Farr 2004; Woolcock 2001). Beyond simply providing the community, including marginalized populations, with access to information, public libraries also strive to educate citizens in handling the information that they come across in an effective manner. As Kranich (2001, 41) observes, “It is from librarians that citizens learn how to find, evaluate, and use the information essential for making decisions that affect the way we live, learn, work, and govern ourselves.” Educating library users to achieve the capacity to make effective use of the information and resources available is a central tenet of libraries. The measure of social inclusion, as outlined by Berman and Phillips (2001, 183), is to “tap into the skills and awareness of citizens,” by asking “how aware are they of what is available?” As for CNs, they offer a gathering place, a more informal environment,
and through their in-person support they enable the empowerment of users through active participation in the life of the CN.

Social capital, social inclusion, and solidarity are important issues around which libraries and CNs share some common ideals in a general sense, although the nature and scope of services of public libraries and CNs differ to some degree. As well, the ways in which they interpret these ideals often differ. For instance, it has been argued that libraries tend to treat social inclusion as a means of making the marginalized more like the mainstream (Caidi and Allard 2005). Furthermore, libraries “have at times only been seen as passive supporters of social change that only indirectly contribute towards changing the disempowered status, experiences, and realities of people on the margins” (Mehra and Srinivasan 2007, 125). In contrast, CNs, with their presumptions of technological prowess, may contribute to defining social inclusion in a rather narrow sense. For example, Powell (2007, 4), in a study of community wireless networking, concludes that “even though this civic participation contributes positively to local communities, Wi-Fi projects seem to contribute primarily to building communities—publics—of Wi-Fi geeks rather than emerging out of more widely constituted local communities.” (See also chapter 11 in this volume.)

In the communications literature, there is a significant amount of interest in CNs as an alternative medium through which to promote active participation in democracy and movements for political reform, but there is little evidence that such an effect exists (Horning 2007; Kubicek and Wagner 2002; Longan 2005). Although Chewar, McCrickard, and Carroll (2005, 263) suggest that one of the primary goals of CNs is to foster the development of social capital, they conclude that “actual implementations of community networks do not yet seem to be effective in building social capital.” Further, research has shown that the connection between CNs and their local community is in some cases being eroded. Kwon (2005), for instance, found that only 20 percent of CN members surveyed actually use CNs because of their community focus and ideals, while the majority were unaware of the differences between CNs and commercial ISPs, which suggested that CN administrators need to do a better job of clarifying and emphasizing their links to communities.

In contrast to CNs, the key tension for librarians seems to be over whether to maintain “the order of the book” or to go to the places where people need information and figure out how best to address these needs. A steady stream of literature and research projects have examined this difficult tension, a discussion that Pateman (2005) termed the “reads” versus “needs” debate, referring to the question of the mission of the library. Is it to provide books and a space for users, or is it to focus instead on the needs of the users wherever they are, whether inside the library walls or out in the community?
exploration of this tension was at the centre of the project Working Together: Library-Community Connections (http://www.librariesincommunities.ca/). Funded by Human Resources and Social Development Canada, the project brought together the Vancouver Public Library, the Toronto Public Library, the Regina Public Library, and the Halifax Public Libraries in an effort to explore community development approaches to working with socially excluded individuals and communities. The objective was to work toward transforming the culture and attitudes of librarians toward socially excluded people and to remove systemic barriers that keep these individuals from using the public library. There are many valuable lessons that can be learned from the Working Together project, in terms of the effectiveness of community development techniques and the assumptions and prejudices inherent in traditional library service planning and delivery.

The Working Together project explored the idea of a community development librarian (CDL) who, by being positioned within the community, would bring the library to the user rather than the user to the library. An interesting distinction is made by the Working Together researchers between “outreach” and “community-based development,” and they favour the latter. The project leader, Brian Campbell (pers. comm. 2006), stated that “‘outreach’ is about working in the community whereas community development is about working with the community.” He went on to describe one of their key findings:

Many librarians lack experience and awareness of the philosophies and techniques of working collaboratively with their communities. Many do not see collaborative community-library service development as different from traditional service planning. Traditionally, librarians assess various inputs and make decisions about what communities need—rather than asking people directly and involving them in the planning and delivering of library services and programs. Understanding this distinction and its philosophical foundation is essential if we are to create public libraries that accept and welcome socially excluded communities.

Summary

It is evident from the above review that libraries and CNs share many values and ideals. However, they also differ to some extent in their practices. As opposed to transforming themselves into telecomputing centres for local communities, libraries complement the technical infrastructure and associated content that CNs offer by providing human resources and a non-discriminating space. Libraries, however, are a different kind of space from CNs. Libraries are more durable, in that they have a longer history, a formal institutional structure (with related funding), and more public “branding” than CNs. Despite the relative
invisibility of librarians’ work, people usually know what to expect when they
walk into a library: the acquisition of a library card for borrowing privileges,
a cozy space for studying or leisure reading, learning opportunities, the use
of computer terminals, in-person support, access to books and other materi-
als, reference or readers’ advisory services, and so on. The public library may
also elicit childhood memories and is a place associated with both entertain-
ment and learning—what Adria, in chapter 18 of this volume, refers to as the
“library ideal.” These elements contribute to making the public library a rec-
ognizable institution in society with well-understood practices and values.

However, the public library is confronted with many challenges in its
attempts to serve its constituencies. Beyond issues of geographical location—
physical access to library branches and associated resources and services—there
may be additional barriers that limit the use of libraries by community mem-
bers. These include a lack of knowledge of the services provided by libraries
(pointing, for example, to a need for clearer signage, more effective outreach,
better visual displays, pamphlets in various languages about services pro-
vided at the library) and a lack of services in minority languages, including
multilingual search capabilities for the collections. (For example, only in
2006 did the Toronto Public Library expand the available translations of its
“Guide to the Library” from four to ten languages.) These challenges exist at
the logistical, financial, linguistic, and cultural levels, as well as in terms of
human resources, empathy, training, and so on. This drives librarians to ask
themselves a number of questions: whether they are assessing the needs and
skills of their users accurately, and perhaps even enhancing them, whether
the services provided by librarians necessarily need to be contained within
the physical space of the library, and whether librarians view their role as ex-
tending to the facilitation of individual empowerment, civic engagement, and
the development of social capital among community members.

The CN, in contrast, does not usually possess the same level of “branding”
and public recognition. However, the characteristics that make the public li-
brary what it is also make it less flexible than its CN counterpart. As part of
their mandate, libraries do not cater to particular groups of people the way
that CNs do for specific geographic communities. Libraries also tend to take a
systemic approach to service delivery. For instance, the Toronto Public Library
is a large system, consisting of close to one hundred branches, and this broad
reach requires a certain amount of standardization. As a result, libraries may
appear to be much less welcoming than a community network that caters to the
needs of the local community (Viseu et al. 2006). Enabling personal connec-
tions, face-to-face interaction, and the formation of social networks are major
assets of CNs, which allow individuals to be involved and valued rather than
simply informed or assisted (Chien 2005; see also chapter 9 in this volume).
**CRACIN CASE STUDIES**

Libraries’ degree of involvement in the various CRACIN case study sites varied but in general was rather limited. As mentioned above, the sites were not selected on the basis of any prior connection to libraries. Rather, by examining cases in which connections developed between libraries and CNs, we sought to understand what came of the collaboration. Through conversations and interviews with people involved with the CNs, we also tried to grasp the prevailing attitudes toward and understanding of the library-CN connection.

**Method**

The method we employed was exploratory in nature. We conducted semi-structured interviews with key informants from each site and held informal discussions with other informants, including some at CNs that had no direct involvement with libraries. We shared our thoughts and preliminary findings at the CRACIN workshops held annually over the course of the four-year project. It was at these sessions in particular that we gained helpful insight from fellow collaborators.

For each of the sites examined—K-Net, St. Christopher House, vCN, the WVDA, Communautique, and the Alberta Library Project—we met with the CN’s key coordinator, and, in some instances, with other individuals at the CN who worked closely with a local library. Even for case study sites that did not have a direct partnership with libraries, we were interested in the role of information professionals and what information practices were conducted at each site.

The questions we asked were intended to yield general information about the site’s users, along with an indication of the most common uses of the site’s services, as well as the users’ most pressing needs. We also asked about the level and nature of the library’s involvement at the site. We wanted to determine whether the public library was a formal partner in the community network (direct affiliation), whether it functioned more as a source of information and aid to which the site’s users could be referred, or whether its involvement with the site was relatively limited. (For example, the only connection might be that the key coordinator or other staff members sometimes made use of library services in the course of their work.) Another set of questions pertained to who at the site was responsible for the organization, indexing, and/or evaluation of the information housed on the site, who made information available to staff and the public, and whether the site offered any training for users to create and evaluate the information provided to them.

It must be noted that all of our informants were CN practitioners. So, in effect, the data presented here is the picture of the relationship as perceived...
by CN participants rather than librarians. As researchers with a background in library and information science, we were the principal link to the library sector. We benefitted from the long-standing relationship developed through CRACIN to explore, and sometimes create, opportunities to talk about the role and potential value of libraries to community network practitioners. Although we were careful not to advocate for libraries, in at least one instance (K-Net), the CRACIN study provided the basis for further discussions about the relationship between libraries and CNs. A spin-off project evolved that aimed at examining the role of libraries in remote and isolated communities of Northern Ontario.

K-Net: Service Provision in Rural and Remote Communities

K-Net, whose primary constituents comprise people living and working in remote and rural First Nations across Northwestern Ontario, was one CRACIN site that had little to no affiliation with libraries. Yet the interest in, and need for, libraries is great in these geographical areas. With only 37 percent of First Nations communities having established libraries, and in view of diminishing operating grants to support the existing ones, First Nations libraries face a formidable challenge in serving the information and reading needs of their communities (Edmonton Public Library 2005; Lawlor 2003; Library and Archives Canada 2004). Not surprisingly, funding is among the major concerns. Public libraries in most Ontario First Nations are funded by the Ontario Ministry of Cultural Heritage and are typically governed by the councils or educational department of each community. Government funding for First Nations public libraries is allotted per capita, so if a First Nation community has a low population, there is relatively scant support for a community library. Since the late 2000s, funding programs and donations from organizations such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Industry Canada (through the Community Access Program), the Southern Ontario Library Service, and the Ontario Library Association have enabled broader access to computers and connectivity to be established in libraries.

Another ongoing challenge is raising awareness among community members about the role and significance that a library might play within the community. Since many individuals in First Nation communities lack basic necessities such as proper shelter, clean water, and heating, it is quite understandable that a library would not be a top priority. Brick-and-mortar libraries, in particular, are difficult to establish because of the shortage of materials and space in Northern communities.

To investigate the options available to provide library services in connection with K-Net, Nadia Caidi worked with Brian Walmark, of the Keewaytinook Okimakanak Research Institute (KORI), to organize a workshop in November
2005, which brought together thirty-two researchers, librarians, band council members, academics, and government officials. (See http://research.ischool.utoronto.ca/dlac/DLAC-Summary.pdf.) The objectives of the workshop were to discuss best possible models for providing information resources and services to communities in remote areas of Northern Ontario and to devise a strategy for the creation of a digital library for elementary and secondary school students in Northern Ontario. Digital libraries offer users the opportunity to access materials that traditional brick-and-mortar libraries might not be able to provide. A large portion of the workshop was devoted to determining exactly what a digital library has to offer and how such a library might best operate in the context of a northern Aboriginal community. It was deemed essential that the digital library fit within the existing knowledge and learning environments of the Keewaytinook Okimakanak community, along the lines of the Internet High School or Telehealth services (Caidi and Walmark 2007).

In the workshop, a clear need was identified for a mixed approach to the provision of information services and resources through digital as well as physical libraries. Community partners and librarians at the workshop pointed out that children in First Nation communities often have limited access to print material and books and often resort to online resources to retrieve information. The need for “information literacy” skills—including the ability to assess the quality and authority of sources—was raised, as well as the challenges of relying solely on web content. In addition to a desire for books relating to curriculum content and development, community partners also expressed interest in creating a repository of culturally relevant works dealing with community knowledge and history, language scripts, and local artifacts. There was also an interest in other types of information, particularly health-related materials and resources, as well as children’s literature and leisure reading materials such as fiction and cookbooks.

Discussions concerning the need for “help desk” services elicited strong interest from the workshop participants. Since many First Nations communities do not have a physical library, a virtual help desk was considered as a possible alternative. That is, by phone, email, instant messaging, or video conferencing, community members would be able to contact a trained librarian, who could provide assistance with reference questions, cataloguing, collection development, or other services related to the functioning of a library in the community. Many workshop attendees felt that such a service would be tremendously important and was even a necessity.

The workshop generated a lot of support and enthusiasm for developing a library project, with a mixture of digital and physical libraries, in Northern Ontario, and some concrete steps were suggested to explore the possibility of further collaboration between the community members at Keewaytinook...
Okimakanak, the K-Net team, government representatives, library practitioners (such as Ontario Library Services North), and the information professionals at the University of Toronto’s Faculty of Information. The workshop resulted in a follow-up project in the form of a feasibility study for the On-Demand Book Service (http://odbs.knet.ca).

The purpose of the On-Demand Book Service (ODBS) is to support the joy of reading in rural and isolated First Nations communities within the context of learning, knowledge sharing, and the recording of history. Modelled on the Internet Archive Bookmobile initiative, the ODBS seeks to bridge the gap between physical and digital libraries. The service builds on the power of ICTs to provide users with physical copies of public domain materials available on the Web, by enabling such works to be downloaded and printed using ODBS printing and bookbinding equipment (see Caidi and Walmark 2007; Caidi and Lam 2011). In addition, materials written by members of the community can be produced as printed books. Such an initiative points to the demand for library services that exists in these communities, as well as to the difficulties involved in procuring funding and establishing sustainable projects that address the particular needs of these communities.

Although the CRACIN project has come to an end, the development of the ODBS forged a relationship between K-Net and the University of Toronto’s Faculty of Information that still continues. In March 2010, the university made funds available from the 2009–10 allocation to the Council on Aboriginal Initiatives for two initiatives related to the On-Demand Book Service: (1) the purchase and shipping of ODBS-related equipment to First Nations communities in remote areas of Northern Ontario, and (2) a public workshop on reading and literacy issues, which focused in particular on the provision of information resources and services and featured the ODBS and other related reading technologies and initiatives. By then, the ODBS had grown to become a web portal that allows students, community leaders, and members of the community to reflect together on issues of access to materials, reading, and library and information services in remote and isolated areas of Northern Ontario. While it remains a work in progress, it has also provided an experiential hands-on workshop that has allowed many students to engage in real-life projects and in community-based research.

With the funding received, three complete sets of ODBS equipment and related technologies were shipped to three Northern Ontario communities. In addition, a selected list of possible titles for download was compiled by our students, in consultation with community partners, based on a survey of the reading preferences of community members that was likewise designed and administered by students. Finally, we were able to send students to the various sites—namely, Thunder Bay, Sioux Lookout, and Keewaywin—to meet
with the community, assist in setting up the equipment, and generally serve as facilitators.

In addition to the shipping of the ODBS equipment, a public event was organized to raise awareness about reading in First Nations communities. The theme of the event, held on 29 March 2010, was “Reading in First Nations: Infrastructure, Access and Imagination.” The goal was to explore the realities, barriers, and challenges to reading in First Nations communities, particularly in remote and isolated areas of Northern Ontario. The meeting was a hybrid of physical and virtual presence via tele- and video conferencing, with four nodes, one each in Toronto, Sioux Lookout, Thunder Bay, and Keewaywin, with bridges to Sandy Lake and other locations. The day included keynote speeches, roundtable discussions with members of various Northern Ontario communities who discussed the obstacles to reading in their communities, and general sharing of stories and experiences. In addition, there were demos of various initiatives aimed at enabling reading in First Nations communities, including the On-Demand Book Service and projects undertaken by individual libraries. The ODBS is a testament to the strong and meaningful relationships that have been built over the past few years as a result of the CRACIN study. The ODBS provides an alternative means to bring information resources and services to isolated communities. But many of these communities still long for traditional libraries, or at least for a combination of physical and virtual libraries, to fulfill the reading needs of local residents.

**St. Christopher House**

St. Christopher House, a well-established community and social service agency in Toronto, offers a sharp contrast to K-Net, notably in its relations to public libraries. St. Christopher House, or St. Chris, is a not-for-profit agency of the United Way that has served the southwest quadrant of downtown Toronto since 1912. St. Chris offers a range of services and resources to disadvantaged community members of all ages. These include computer and Internet access, employment services and skills training, information about nutrition, language and literacy courses, legal services, counselling, and recreational and housing support services, making St. Chris an essential resource for its community of users. St. Chris has seven locations that provide community access to training and over seventy computer terminals with high-speed Internet service. St. Chris has also developed a community learning network (CLN), a web-accessible content management system that uses a participatory approach to its design and development. By enabling users to create a shared physical and online space where individuals and groups can share ideas, network, and learn from one another, the CLN allows users to be both producers and consumers of content. (For more on the St. Chris CLN, see chapter 8.)
In its early days, St. Chris founded a children’s library, which was taken over by the Toronto Public Library in 1921 and remained in operation for almost forty years. Today, however, St. Chris does not interact very much with the public library branches in its vicinity. From our discussions with St. Chris staff, it became clear that St. Chris views its mission as essentially different from that of a public library. Although staff members still refer users to the library whenever appropriate and collaborate with the library on occasion, St. Chris maintains its distinct presence and identity. There have been collaborations between the St. Chris team and information professionals and researchers on various aspects of the CLN and other endeavours, and those at St. Chris understand that librarians and information professionals can bring skills to the table that are a valuable addition to their own technical expertise. Over the years, a mutually beneficial and respectful relationship has thus been established, in the form of referrals and specific collaborations between St. Chris and the Toronto Public Library (as well as the University of Toronto’s Faculty of Information). In the case of St. Chris, however, CN developers maintain a strong sense of what their identity and mission is and how it differs from that of the public library.

Vancouver Community Network (VCN)

The Vancouver Community Network (VCN) presents yet another scenario. A senior administrator at the Vancouver Public Library was a founding member of VCN. Over the years, the relationship between VPL and VCN has persisted, although it has assumed a different form. The Vancouver Public Library provides both space and bandwidth for VCN. In turn, VCN acts as a technical infrastructure, offering access to ICTs for thousands of individuals and groups who could not otherwise afford it. Funding is a mixture of donations to cover the telecommunications costs, special projects, and contracts, as well as public funds from the federal government and the city. In addition to user accounts, VCN provides content management services and meets the learning needs of its users, mainly in the form of IT skills. As a physical space, VCN plays an important social function by allowing individuals to gather and share information, broaden their social networks, and engage in various forms of civic participation. In chapter 9 of this volume, Diane Dechief characterizes VCN as a type of “third space” for new immigrants. She depicts the recent immigrants as a technically savvy “alternate civic core,” made up of individuals who make a major contribution to VCN’s volunteer program. In the process, they gain much needed Canadian work experience, as well as social networking opportunities, thereby improving their job prospects.

From our discussion with key respondents, the relationship between VCN and the Vancouver Public Library now seems to be limited largely to
technical support. As has so often been the case, the relationship between the two depends heavily on existing contacts between particular individuals at the library, whose interests in VCN may be shifting. The philosophy of VCN revolves around providing access to information and ICTs to the economically disadvantaged. While the library community shares these ideals, the VCN respondents indicated that, as they see it, in practice librarians “do things differently.” The prevailing sentiment was that libraries and librarians adhere to a more rigid, structured, and formal set of rules, preferring “to do things in particular ways” and otherwise “possessing a strong sense of ownership of the physical space of the library,” and perhaps being constrained by it. There was no sense of competing interests between the two, but rather an acceptance that the two entities were different and were meant to achieve different purposes. An example was advanced regarding the provision of services to newcomers. Because of union rules, the library cannot provide such individuals with some of the same opportunities that VCN can offer them, such as the opportunity to volunteer. This local experience allows them to be involved in and contribute to the day-to-day activities of the CN, interact with a wide range of Canadian-born as well as immigrant individuals, hone their IT skills, and build their résumé, thus potentially enhancing their opportunities for paid employment.

In the case of VCN, we thus have a scenario in which a public library was, thanks to the commitment of a particular individual, a founding member of the CN. However, the relationship failed to develop beyond the sharing of technical support and IT equipment (e.g., server space). Ultimately, the two entities pursued different trajectories and came to be relatively estranged from one another.

**Western Valley Development Agency (WVDA)**

Despite having core funding, the Western Valley Development Agency (WVDA) closed down in 2005, when several of the constituent municipalities withdrew the funding needed to receive matching funds from provincial and federal agencies. (For details, see chapter 19.) In terms of the relationship between WVDA and the local library, two factors seem to have limited the interaction between the two: (1) the state of libraries in urban versus rural/remote areas, and (2) the reliance on one individual’s time and commitment. The WVDA shared with K-Net the poor state of library services that so often prevails in rural or isolated geographical areas. This situation makes it hard for libraries, which are already underfunded, to find the resources they need to take on additional endeavours. At the same time, reaching out to other community organizations is critical to fulfilling the needs of the residents in such areas, and for making the best of what can be a challenging situation. In the case of
the WVDA, once again a single individual acted as a bridge between the CN and the library. In this case, a librarian became involved in the CN efforts and was able to maintain a working connection between the two, until funding problems forced the WVDA to shut down. The benefits of this bridging were mutual. It conferred a deeper understanding of the commonalities between CNs and libraries, and it educated the users and staff of each about the resources and services available and delivered by the other. Such a rapprochement also demands, and thus encourages, a certain amount of creativity, in the use of space, for example, or in the delivery of services. However, on the down side, much rested upon the shoulders of one individual, which is inherently a precarious arrangement. If that individual were to leave, the relationship obviously would be jeopardized.

**Communautique**

Of all the CRACIN case study sites we examined, Communautique is the only one that was not involved with libraries. The Communautique team partnered with various other CNs and agencies, but this did not include the public library, despite the organization's strong emphasis on civic engagement (*l'Internet citoyen*) and a focus on using ICTs to empower citizens. As in the case of VCN and, to a certain degree, St. Chris, there was a sense that the mission of the CN and that of the library were complementary but essentially different, that their funding models differed, and that the institutional structure of the library system did not lend itself to the ways and practices of the CN. In our discussions with Communautique members, we noted a set of assumptions on the part of the Communautique team regarding what it is that libraries “do,” with library practices viewed as distinct from the mode of operation of the CN. There was also a sense that libraries existed in a parallel but separate world from Communautique and other CNs. In this case, these perceptions may have hindered any potential for creative collaborations between the two entities. It is also possible that librarians harboured their own misconceptions about Communautique, although we did not speak to any librarians (as none were identified).

**The Alberta Library Project**

Perhaps the most concrete example of the potential of libraries to support community networking was found in the CRACIN case study titled “The Alberta Library and the Social and Organizational Implications of Broadband in Canadian Public Libraries.” This research suggests that public libraries are moving beyond their roles as simple information providers to become places where communication, interaction, and social exchanges occur. The study, in which four rural public libraries took part, involved an innovative pilot
project designed to demonstrate the possible uses of video conferencing technology in library settings. The project focused on the role of oral history in the preservation of community memory, in this case through intergenerational storytelling sessions aimed at Grade 3 children, some of whom participated in the sessions from remote locations, via video conference (Adria et al. 2007; Adria and Parrish 2005; University of Alberta 2004). In addition, through interviews with librarians and community members, the Alberta Library Project team was able to explore the perceptions of local community members regarding the place of new technologies in the delivery of library services. They discovered a mix of welcoming and unwelcoming attitudes, which suggests the areas in which barriers exist that will need to be overcome. (For analysis, see chapter 18.)

Although in this case local libraries collaborated with schools, rather than with existing CNs, the study has positive implications for the role of libraries in community networking initiatives. First, social capital might be generated through the development of new partnerships, formed through the use of broadband and other ICTs such as video conferencing. Second, a vast landscape such as Alberta’s, which includes extensive rural areas, calls for enhanced cohesion and uniquely situates the public libraries, which are attempting to fulfill the needs of diverse users—often the most marginalized. Finally, engaging children in storytelling and allowing them to interact both with each other and with the storyteller by means of video conferencing promises to foster social inclusion. The case study richly illustrates how public libraries can harness the power of ICTs in novel ways both to provide traditional services, not only to disadvantaged users but to the entire community, and to build bridges among communities that are geographically distant from one another.

LESSONS LEARNED

The brief overview above of the literature on public libraries’ involvement in community development and on community networks points to various issues that were subsequently examined in the context of the CRACIN case studies. As we have noted, because a relationship with a public library was not one of the criteria by which CRACIN case study sites were selected, there are limitations to these findings and how they may be generalized. Along the way, however, there were some lessons that could help funding agencies and policy makers alike to ensure that a community-based project will be carried out in a way that optimizes its chances of success. The overarching question concerns the prospects for future co-operative efforts between libraries and CNs.
Schuler and others have argued that CNs and libraries can work together to develop training programs, public access approaches, forums and roundtable discussions, advocacy positions, and policy recommendations. Schuler (n.d.) states that CNs and libraries should work together “to help do with electronic information and communication what the public library has done with print media,” in order to safeguard public spaces and resources on the Internet. Citing Joan Durrance, Bajjaly (1999) suggests the following ways that libraries can share their expertise and skills with CNs:

- Librarians’ ability to organize and catalog information for more effective retrieval
- Needs assessments of the community needs and experience in addressing the everyday life information needs, uses, and practices of various user groups (i.e., youth, seniors, immigrants, professionals, etc.)
- Skills in volunteer management
- Expertise in policy development
- Experience with collaboration (e.g., public library systems’ rotating collections).

In addition, some lessons can be drawn from the CRACIN case studies. As the K-Net example illustrates, in remote and isolated communities, where no physical library exists, there may be opportunities for CNs to take on some of the traditional roles of libraries. As Shade (1999) reminds us, CNs are, by nature, sites for the exchange of information: they are “local systems, run by local people and organizations, utilizing local resources to meet local communications, educational, social, and economic needs.” Funding programs could support such efforts by hiring librarians, archivists, or other information professionals to help CNs organize their databases, collections, classification schemes, and finding aids, so that these resources will be more easily accessible to users. Librarians could also work with CN practitioners to teach information literacy skills to community members to support their search for reliable online information. Furthermore, in many cases, CNs can contribute to keeping the collective community memory alive by archiving local materials and information pertaining to the history and fabric of the community. Librarians and CN staff could extend these opportunities in an urban setting through outreach to particular communities, especially vulnerable ones such as the urban poor, immigrants, seniors, youth, children, and small business entrepreneurs, who need access to a range of resources and services.

It seems likely that both libraries and CNs could benefit from each other’s “branding.” While some may perceive the dogged association of public libraries with print and books (Online Computer Library Center 2005), no one can argue with the “permanence” of their institutional status in society. It is possible that more formal associations between libraries and CNs
could revive both. In the case of CNs, a home or at least some kind of physical presence in the library might provide the sort of public visibility that many have suggested is needed to set CNs apart from commercial service providers (Carroll and Rosson 2003; Shade 1999). In turn, public libraries might benefit from the technology skills of community networkers, from more formalized ties with community organizations, and with access to digital information and services channels and distribution mechanisms. (Only slightly more than half of all respondents in a 2005 survey by the Online Computer Library Center were aware that public libraries provided remote access to electronic resources.)

As we have seen, co-operation between CNs and libraries has often been instigated by a committed individual—from the library, the CN, or both—who reaches out to the other side and acts as a bridge between the two worlds. More often than not, it is through these personal connections, rather than through more formal organizational design, that a relationship develops. However, these kinds of partnerships are inherently somewhat fragile, as they may be jeopardized by events in the personal life of the key individual(s)—loss of job, changing circumstances such as a move, death, or promotion, sacrifices in other aspects of one’s life, burnout, and so on. In this regard, there is a need for longer-term planning to sustain these ties and types of collaborations.

In order to serve and meet the community needs, libraries and CNs need to recognize each other’s potential as partners. One way for CNs to make their connections with local communities more explicit and to distinguish themselves from commercial providers is through stronger ties with libraries. To be more active in the community networking movement, libraries could broaden their scope and the nature of their involvement in community-based initiatives. They could rethink how they can best reach out to their constituency, even seeing themselves as engaging in “community-based development,” and keep up to date with community members’ needs, including directing them to other initiatives established by community networks. In addition, more awareness and renewed skills need to be taught to information professionals to enable them to work more closely with other community development professionals, practitioners, and members of the community.

NOTES
1 In the context of large urban centres, however, revisionist historians understand “the history of public library development within the history of the development of modern industrial capitalism” and the processes of institutionalization and professionalization that led to the formation of a middle class (Christine Pawley, “Foreword,” in Garrison 2003, xxvii).
2 The 1990s in Canada also saw the injection of federal government funding to bridge the digital divide in the Connecting Canadians initiative. See chapter 1 for more details.

COMMUNITY NETWORKS AND LIBRARIES

4 The full set of equipment included a computer station, an all-in-one colour laser printer and scanner, a thermo book binder, a do-it-yourself (DIY) book binder, a prototype of a DIY book scanner, portable e-tablets, and associated publishing and editing software.

5 As a possible model for CN presence in libraries, consider a recent initiative funded by Citizenship and Immigration Canada called the Library Settlement Partnerships (LSP), which places settlement workers in public libraries across the province of Ontario to provide services to new immigrants. See http://www.lsp-peb.ca/ for more information.

REFERENCES


Powell, Alison. 2007. Wi-Fi publics: Community Wi-Fi and the production of community and technology. Paper presented at the Final Workshop of the Canadian Research Alliance for Community Innovation and Networking, Montréal, 20–22 June.


