With its mandate to provide public, open space for the dissemination of information, through books as well as free access to the Internet, the public library is well-positioned to support community networks. In very small and rural communities, in fact, the public library already functions as the centre of the community network, simply because the public library is the institution mandated to provide information to all citizens. Information and coordination of issues of public interest are managed within the public library on behalf of the community, through such facilities as bulletin boards that are used for posting meeting times and places, display areas for the distribution of pamphlets and brochures, and access to public meeting rooms. As broadband arrives in public libraries in small communities across Canada, the potential emerges for a more widespread use of technology to expand the library’s participation in and support for the community network.

In this chapter I explore the meaning that community members associate with new technology use in the public library. Using video conferencing as a prototypical example of a technology to which people can respond in a concrete way, I seek to gauge the prospects for an expanded public library and an enhanced community network, especially in rural communities. The case of video conferencing and its possible introduction into the public library was
developed as a sensitizing concept, or guiding heuristic, for possible use in examining other technologies. Video conferencing is capable of presenting moving images, allows for two-way communication, and is “always on.” Community video conferencing could be added to the standard menu of services available in the local public library, just as Internet access was added in the 1990s. Community video conferencing could support programming areas such as storytelling, local and regional history, public services, advocacy/interest groups, social services, and continuing education. Respondents saw potential uses of community video conferencing in the public library but identified social, organizational, and practical barriers to its possible implementation.

The research questions presented here were drawn from an analysis of the historical roots of the public library in North America and assessed in the light of a social constructivist approach to technology use, following the work of Gurstein and others, to develop the community informatics area (see chapter 2 in this volume). The public library is part of the social and cultural context of rural Canada. The interplay of politics, media, and public education in western Canada has been addressed in a number of historical and sociological studies (Faris 1975; Irving 1959; Laycock 1990; Schultz 1964). In an earlier publication (Adria 2010), I examined the roots of the use of ICTs for community development in the context of regional and national identity. Early radio broadcast experiments in western Canada, for example, were concerned with what the new technology of radio—and, by extension, the modern mediated social world—would introduce to the social and political culture of mid-century Canada. E. A. “Ned” Corbett, a University of Alberta educator, was involved in the establishment of the first educational broadcasting station in Canada, Ckua Radio, and, through his later work with the Canadian Association for Adult Education, the National Farm Radio Forum and Citizens’ Forum. Both broadcasts were presented nationally on CBC radio, becoming a notable thread in the social, cultural, and political life of Alberta. Both broadcasts represented experiments in deliberative democracy for community development through what we would now call community informatics. They constituted early efforts to develop new media in ways that would draw on and expand local knowledge.

The public library was the hub of community learning in the early part of the twentieth century, and advocates of “extension” and “adult education” relied on the public library to support community learning (Corbett 1957; Faris 1975). Although highly popular, the model of media use represented by such programs was left aside for another model involving federal regulation of cultural content (Berland and Hornstein 2000). The research questions in this study are informed by the historical context of new media in the public library in Canada. They are concerned with the ways that local communities
interpret and respond to new media, especially as those new media may contribute to the codification and expansion of local knowledge.

Respondents in the study were considered in their social context of technological development and use, forming a kind of community of practice. Their responses were interpreted within that framework. The research questions were as follows:

1. How do library users and decision makers view the use of physical space in the public library? This question was important for an understanding of how a new use of library space might displace an existing use.

2. How do library users and decision makers view the use of new technology, understood as digital information and communication technology (ICT) in the public library? This question was explored in the context of a broadband network, and specifically in relation to the potential development of community video conferencing.

3. As technology adoption occurs, what changes in the relative importance of information-seeking activities, on the one hand, and interaction activities, on the other, are likely to take place in the public library? This question addressed the primary advance that broadband offers over the dial-up Internet connection, which is the capacity to offer real-time interaction using moving images.

**METHODS**

Four rural communities in Canada were part of the study described in this chapter, involving about forty respondents representing a cross-section of local residents and officials associated with the public library. Qualitative analysis of interviews and focus groups revealed key ideas and themes expressed by respondents. The primary data collection methods were twenty-six semi-structured interviews and four focus groups (one in each community), which involved a total of forty participants, including librarians, trustees, citizens, and local politicians. The public libraries in four rural communities were selected as research sites. To provide interview and focus-group respondents with a reasonable assurance of anonymity, pseudonyms for these four Alberta communities are used here—Forestville, Prairietown, Collegetown, and Isletown. The four were chosen from the 429 communities to be connected by the Alberta SuperNet, a government-sponsored broadband network. The primary criterion for choosing these four communities was the potential for supporting an investigation into the potential adoption of new technologies in public libraries. In addition, the communities represent differing characteristics in terms of size, degree of technology adoption, and proximity to an urban centre. They range in population from 2,500 to 70,000. Prairietown,
the community that has the largest population and is the most technologically advanced, has a branch library in addition to the main downtown library. The other three communities have one public library in the community. In the case of Collegetown, the closest city with a population of more than 100,000 is over 100 kilometres away. The Alberta Library, a network of almost all of Alberta’s public and post-secondary libraries in the province, introduced the researchers to the libraries. All four libraries that were approached agreed to participate in the study. Respondents were generally well educated, working in professional occupations and earning moderate incomes. In that sense, they represented the broad middle class that constitutes the largest group of patrons and supporters of the public library (Berelson 1949). Table 18.1 shows respondents by professional or community role and by community.

**TABLE 18.1 Respondents by professional/community role and community**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional or community role</th>
<th>Community</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Library staff and board members</td>
<td>Forestville</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n = 17</td>
<td>n = 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Municipal councillors and administrators</td>
<td>Prairietown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n = 4</td>
<td>n = 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economic development board</td>
<td>Collegetown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n = 2</td>
<td>n = 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social service agency staff</td>
<td>Isletown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n = 7</td>
<td>n = 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other citizens</td>
<td>Other communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n = 10</td>
<td>n = 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TOTAL: 40 respondents

To provide respondents with a sense of what the abstract notion of “broadband networks” in the community could involve in practice, as well as to develop a level of engagement of both researchers and community members in the issues of interest, the researchers organized two events (one in each of two of the four communities) related to the use of video conferencing in the public library. Some of the interviews and all of the focus groups took place after these two events and therefore allowed respondents to make reference to the practical experience of the events.

First, two video conferenced intergenerational storytelling sessions in Forestville and Prairietown were organized in collaboration with the local public library and a local school in each community. Holding these sessions in only two of the four communities allowed for a reference point of technology
use for all four communities: respondents in all four communities could discuss the video conferenced storytelling sessions, even though respondents in two communities would be commenting on events occurring in communities not their own. Each storytelling session was a technology-demonstration pilot project that linked Grade 3 students in Forestville and Prairietown and represented an instance of bringing oral history to life. Oral history resides in the memories of community members, rather than in printed accounts such as books and other records. The project provided an opportunity for community members to separate the opportunities for social interaction that a technology such as video conferencing provides from a concern with the hardware and complexities of the technology.

The relationship of storytelling to the technology of video conferencing is rooted in the continuous and synchronous characteristics of the technology (Bly, Harrison, and Irwin 1993). Video conferencing provides users the ability to present moving images. It allows for two-way communication and is “always on.” In the technical sense, video conferencing provides opportunities for the immediate and continuous verbal, nonverbal, and visual cues that storytelling requires. As a consequence, community video conferencing could be added to the standard menu of services available in the local public library. The capacity of storytelling to bridge generations and allow for an exchange of expressed values and felt needs has been explored by sociologists who study aging (Meadows 2004), suggesting that video conferencing and intergenerational storytelling can be combined for community capacity building and for encouraging cultural cohesiveness.

The participative nature of the project ensured the involvement of many community members in meaningful ways. Participants included parents, children, museum staff, private information technology professionals, and local politicians, in addition, of course, to librarians, library staff, and library trustees. Local knowledge creation was at the heart of the project. A local storyteller in each community spoke to the local and remote students (linked by video conference) about their childhoods in Alberta. Children in each location also had the opportunity to greet one another using the video conferencing equipment and to ask questions of the storyteller. Videotaped recordings of the storytelling sessions were created and made available in each public library.

Second, a workshop on the use of video conferencing in the public library was held as part of a regional conference on library technology. Researchers made a presentation on the practical implications of establishing a community video conferencing program in their communities and discussed the potential use of video conferencing in their public libraries. This was attended by approximately thirty community representatives from across Alberta, including
The next three sections of this chapter present the theoretical approach of the study. Community informatics as an area of study is rooted in an ethos of praxis, with practitioners and scholars concerned mainly with explaining the values by which a social movement may be sustained (Buré 2006; de Moor and Wiegand 2006; Schuler and Day 2004). Schuler (1996) has argued that the public library should continue to be in a complementary relationship to the community network. In chapter 17 of this volume, Caidi, MacDonald, and Chien suggest that the public library and the community network share some characteristics but differ significantly, arguing that the two should be regarded as complementary. In the absence of a particular theory of technology adoption in the public library for the purpose of community networking, three primary areas of related research are examined here: the history of the public library as an institution, the social construction of technology, and empirical studies of the uses of video conferencing.

**HISTORY OF THE PUBLIC LIBRARY IN NORTH AMERICA**

The contemporary public library's mandate, mission, and operations are rooted in the protocols of community governance established in Boston in the nineteenth century. The "Boston protocols," as they are referred to here, were based on a report by the library trustees in July 1852 (Pungitore 1995). The Boston protocols were adopted by other cities and towns in Massachusetts and then in the rest of the United States and Canada. They have remained relatively constant for 150 years and are often cited in the professional training provided for librarians (Raber 2007). Although they are not widely acknowledged or understood by the public, they provide a historically valid perspective on the evolution of the public library as a significant and politically vibrant organization that is part of the social life of even the smallest of communities in the United States and Canada. The protocols represent relatively simple principles that have had a remarkably potent and durable presence in the development of cultural life in the two countries. They constitute an institutional framework within which community members base their notions of organizational change in the public library. Notable in the protocols are the following components of the public library in modern history: space, technology, information seeking, and interaction. These are discussed in turn below.
Space
The Boston protocols for the public library were permissive rather than prescriptive. They allowed for or anticipated state legislation that would enable geographic districts or local government units to establish physical space in the community that would be devoted to offering the services of the public library. The legislation would not mandate the establishment or maintenance of libraries. However, if a public library were to be created in a particular locale, it was to be considered a “public good” and therefore supported on a continuous basis with local public funding. A public library became recognizable as such, and therefore deemed worthy of public support through tax allocations and other public grants, if it was dedicated to maintaining an information repository and if it was established as a public entity with a policy of universal access. The physical space opened by application of the Boston protocols continues to be modest in comparison to other civic institutions, but the open and free nature of the space, through offering universal access, remains a key characteristic of the public library.

Technology
The Boston protocols did not use the term technology, but in establishing a public library a community committed itself to the use of certain technologies—defined as basic tools, such as shelves for books, a cataloguing system, a record system for lending privileges, and the physical premises and systems by which the library’s space and collection were secured for citizens’ use. These technologies would change through adoption and innovation in subsequent decades. The public library’s mandate and mission are broad, and there are many constituencies involved in shaping the organization’s operations and its adoption of technology. The Boston protocols required that governance of the institution was to be carried out as a public trust, with a board of trustees mandated to set budget, maintain a staff, and set policy, including policy concerning technology for providing access to the public. A given technology may find wide application in the public library only if many individuals and groups arrive at a consensus about the meaning of the technology in relation to the library’s mandate. As Servon notes in regard to the movement to establish public Internet workstations in North America, libraries have been early leaders in the “community technology movement” (Servon 2002, 231). However, if libraries have the mandate and the organizational capacity to adopt technology relatively quickly, there are limits to such actions. In part this is because a consensus must be reached among government, library staff, and the board of trustees before a new technology is introduced.
Information Seeking
The public library includes, as a core provision of its mandate, the policy of free access to residents of the jurisdiction that the library is chartered to serve. Access to the library is in significant part maintained for the purpose of finding information. Public libraries may provide the context for digital genres by the organization of materials (for example, displaying selections and bibliographies prepared by librarians) and by making available information and training materials related to digital literacy, that is, the skills needed to find and interpret digital information (Pawley 2003).

Interaction
The Boston protocols stated that the public library should have an educational purpose (Pungitore 1995, 17), and this implies something more than information seeking. Interaction has been part of the library’s mandate from the beginning, and such a change would be a shift relative to other activities, rather than a new activity. The status of interaction has remained equivocal for a century and a half. Recently, Marcum (2002) called for a move from the concept of the library as a centre for information literacy, which he sees as overly broad and too firmly rooted in the information-system paradigm, to what he calls the library as a “discovery system,” or the “learning library.”

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF TECHNOLOGY
Technology is adopted and used through a process that has come to be known as the social construction of technology (Bijker, Hughes, and Pinch 1987). In this view, the intrinsic properties of a technology are not the only means by which its adoption may be explained or predicted. Instead, relevant social groups contribute to the meaning that is eventually associated with a technology. These groups enjoy “interpretative flexibility” (Bijker 1995). They make judgments about how a technology is to be interpreted and what meanings should be ascribed to it. Interpretive flexibility decreases when the meanings ascribed to a technology become less ambiguous and more stable. Thereafter, the interpretation of a relevant social group finally becomes dominant, and closure occurs, thereby achieving a consensus about the meaning of the technology.

Professional norms and other cultural factors may influence the meaning that a technology assumes within a given organization. The purpose of a given technology can vary significantly, even within the same kind of organization. A Swedish study showed, for example, that, following from professional norms, social workers viewed information technologies as an “administrative evil.” They therefore ignored the many functionalities of a new groupware
system that had been promoted by the manufacturer and endorsed by management, preferring to use only the email function (Henfridsson 2000; see also Barley 1986).

**VIDEO CONFERENCING**

Video conferencing is a technology-mediated form of communication involving voice, video, text, and graphic data, which are exchanged electronically by participants at geographically dispersed locations. Many studies have demonstrated the uses, advantages, and disadvantages of video conferencing (Campbell 1997). Much of the literature on video conferencing is concerned with formal settings, such as business meetings. The informal settings represented by uses within the public library have not been examined in a systematic way. Tovey (2007) notes that the use of video conferencing in the library represents a competency that should be developed. However, the literature suggests that video conferencing should be viewed as a structuring technology, in that it will shape the uses and public image of the library. Through pilot programs and careful study, the potential use of video conferencing should be explored before full implementation is considered.

**Uses**

Video conferencing usage is continuing to grow in organizations because of the increasing globalization of commerce and the geographical dispersion of business units and customers, with the concomitant need for groups of people within these dispersed settings to work together in an effective and timely fashion. Svenning and Ruchinskas (1984) note that if video conferencing is to be adopted as a valid communication medium, there must be acceptance by both the organization and the individuals within the organization. Distance learning has been noted as an important use of video conferencing in the public library (Chandler 2001), which confirms the relevance of the concept of the “learning library.”

**Advantages and Disadvantages**

A video conferencing system uses video images as well as sound to duplicate as closely as possible the experience of face-to-face meetings without imposing the burden of travel. In a video conferenced meeting, participants can see not only the reactions of their colleagues but also pictures, graphs, and three-dimensional objects, as they would in a traditional face-to-face meeting. Research suggests that as communication bandwidth narrows, as in video conferenced versus face-to-face meeting environments, a feeling of contact or social presence decreases and communication is likely to be
best described as less friendly, impersonal, business-like, and depersonalized (Hiemstra 1982; Williams 1978). Within organizational and business contexts, there have been attempts to try to introduce or encourage the use of informal factors such as “small talk” and nonverbal language (Bly, Harrison, and Irwin 1993; Fish, Kraut, and Chalfonte 1990; Fish et al. 1992; Fish et al. 1993; Isaacs, Walendowski, and Ranganathan 2002; Landauer and Kraut 1990). The findings of research undertaken in organizational settings cannot be reliably generalized to other contexts such as public spaces. However, the benefits identified by research under favourable organizational conditions indicate that (1) meetings are shorter, as people tend to concentrate specifically on the task at hand, (2) meetings are more task-oriented, (3) meetings are better structured, (4) meetings are more orderly, even though less hierarchically organized and less status oriented, (5) there is generally more equality of participation, and (6) more opinion exchange occurs and persuasion is more successful.

In sum, concepts were drawn from the social and organizational structure of the public library and from a theory of human action involving the interpretative flexibility surrounding technology adoption. The Boston protocols constitute the public library’s basic social dimensions of space, technology, information seeking, and interaction. The theory of the social construction of technology suggests that individuals and groups establish the meaning of a technology through discourse, and discourse provides the basis for the potential adoption of technology. Video conferencing offers a mode of interaction in which task completion may be enhanced, while certain communicational aspects of the context are reduced.

CODING AND ANALYSIS

The hermeneutic circle, which gives attention to the relationship of interdependent parts to the whole that they form, is a key principle in interpretive studies (Klein and Myers 1999). The hermeneutic process has been described in relation to Miles and Huberman’s (1994) principle of alternating between cultivating theoretical concepts and returning repeatedly to what research subjects have said. In this way, the abstract concept of the adoption of technology in public libraries, which involves the social construction of technology as a fundamental theory of human action, is considered in a way that allows for potential generalization. In the study present here, the hermeneutic circle was developed through attention to the relationship of the theoretical perspectives of the transcripts through successive stages of analysis. Data analysis therefore proceeded in a tandem relationship with the activity of data collection, allowing each to inform the other. The analysis was carried
out iteratively, tacking between examinations of data and development of a conceptual framework. In this hermeneutic process, analysis of respondents’ statements corresponded to the parts of the emerging conceptual framework, while theoretical interpretations corresponded to the whole. The conceptual framework was structured according to the dimensions of the worldview associated with communities of practice: knowledge, values, meanings, assumptions, beliefs, and practices (Pawlowski and Robey 2004; Wenger 1998). Transcripts were coded according to rubrics corresponding to these dimensions, which are the etic level of the analytical coding system, corresponding to the “outsider’s” point of view, which is that of the analyst.

The second level of analyses of respondents’ statements is the emic level, or the “insider’s” point of view. These indicate the division of the rubrics into subcategories representing the possible means by which a new technology might change the management, practices, and status of the public library in the community. The first three emic subcategories are space, technology, and information seeking. These subcategories correspond to the main elements of the public library as an organization and are abstract expressions of the Boston protocols. The remaining three subcategories related to interaction are based on the work of Lyytinen and Hirschheim (1988), who suggest that any information system provides three opportunities for accomplishing discursive action:

1. Establish new channels for communication (e.g., email made available using Internet stations in the library)
2. Redistribute access to existing information (e.g., allocating some portion of a video conference facility for the use of the disabled)
3. Provide new information that can act as “data” or “warrant” in a discourse (e.g., subscribing to an e-periodical on environmental issues that is used by community groups involved in advocacy).

Analysis of the data involved three steps. First, the audiotapes from the interviews were transcribed and notes made following an overall review of the transcripts. Second, transcript coding was carried out by the researcher and two research assistants. Third, a weekly discussion of the research team took place over a period of twelve weeks as coding proceeded, during which themes were identified and potential data representations considered. Data representation involved linking themes in a relationship of possible meanings and was accomplished through the use of graphical text boxes and arrows. The researcher had several opportunities to scrutinize the emerging themes and their relationships to one another (Miles and Huberman 1994).

The results of the study, which are presented in the next four sections, are organized according to the following themes, which were identified through
transcript analysis: library space as an ideal, using technology to expand the library’s space, and opportunities for information seeking and interaction in the library.

**LIBRARY SPACE AS AN IDEAL**

**Ideal of the Public Library**

In discussing the potential use of technologies such as video conferencing in the public library, respondents described the community use of library space as an ideal. The ideal of the public library was discussed in terms of three characteristics of the public library: its capacity to address a wide range of public demands and needs, the perceived limitless range of activities that take place or could take place in the library, and the size, nature, and purpose of the library space.

Respondents described the library as a community-based organization that serves a diverse set of interests and a diverse range of people. A social service worker in Prairietown, for example, stated that every community needs a public library in order to serve the many needs and demands of the population. As a user of the public library in Collegetown put it, the public library “provides accessibility in many ways, shapes, and forms to people who don’t have it.” Respondents suggested that there were almost no limits to what the library did or could do. For example, the same individual stated that the library can provide information about leisure activities as a means of supporting and encouraging such activities: “If you don’t have access to the Internet or your email . . . the library is a great place to do that. I’ve always wanted to know what to do with geraniums in the winter, so people can go to the library and do that. Maybe the gardening club could meet.”

The diversity of interests and activities represented by the public library was based not only on what respondents observed actually taking place in the library but also on memories from childhood or youth. Respondents referred to an ideal of the public library, a view they had developed in some earlier stage of their lives (Altman and Low 1992). In their accounts, they compared this ideal to the changes in the library that might follow from the introduction and use of new technology. A manager of a community-based organization in Forestville mentioned the experience of her childhood and youth and that of her social contemporaries: “[For] the friends I know who are really into the library, it was something that they grew up with as being an important place in the community. They knew it was a source of information. If you didn’t have it in your own library at home, then it would be a place where you could look for it.”

The public library space was reported to be separate in some ways from
other spaces, such as the university or school, but in other ways it was described as being related to these other spaces by its purpose of allowing for reflection. Reflection is possible in the public library not simply because of the relative quiet but because of the library’s separateness from other spaces and its intimacy. Public libraries are smaller than other facilities, according to the ideal to which respondents referred. A trustee in Collegetown associated the size of the public library with the rural setting of the town, noting that “everyone knows the librarian.”

In sum, respondents reported the public library to be a space in which exists an ideal of open and free access and a diverse range of many interests and demands, and in which activities take place involving interaction, as opposed to only information seeking.

**A Place for “Other” People**

As respondents discussed the potential use of technology in the public library, they created a consistently positive image of the library in the community. This consistency was maintained even in those instances in which the library was not seen as living up to the ideal role and operation of the public library. Respondents chose from among their knowledge stocks in order to select positive or sympathetic comments about the library. This was the case even if they stated, as the mayor of Isletown did, that they were not regular or even occasional users of the library: “[The library] doesn’t appeal to me . . . but from the mayor’s perspective . . . having a facility like that is incredible. And they continue to grow. We moved them about eight years ago from a space that was about half the size of now, to this space. They have had two expansions since and now are talking about another.”

Respondents described the library as an ideal social space, but they often identified disadvantaged individuals and groups, not themselves, as the main beneficiaries of the public library’s function. This identification established a limit on the ideal of the public library, since it specified a select group as enjoying the benefits of the public library. When they considered the adoption of new technologies in the public library, respondents stated some measure of approval for new technologies, as part of what may be called a “welcoming” approach, but this support was limited by references to the relatively limited group that would benefit by such technologies. Because the public library is managed, governed, and influenced in its policy by many individuals in the community, it is this wider context of technological development that is considered. Overall, there is a welcoming approach to technology that may be identified, which has contributed to the public library being an early adopter of technology (Servon 2002). However, the attitude to technology on the part of the community is also unwelcoming, and this is related to the community’s
adherence to a view of the public library as a kind of enchanted space—solitary yet communal (Morrill and Snow 2005), quiet but imbued with the autonomous agency of the patron (Suttles 1972) and with the symbolism of housing and protecting the venerable medium of the printed word, often in buildings of imposing civic architecture (Hummon 1990). As we saw, this view draws on quite durable and long-standing historical roots, as suggested by the enduring application of the Boston protocols.

The town manager in Forestville stated that although other members of his family used the public library, he didn’t because he had a computer. It was therefore a place for “other” people. In this sense, the social function of the public library is complementary to the active membership of the community network, which, although in the abstract sense is open to all community members, in practical fact is given life by only a small portion of the population.

### Learning and Literacy

In describing the primary role of the public library in the community, respondents referred to the educational function of the library as a broadly beneficial “public good.” Indeed, the Boston protocols suggested that education is a key function of the public library. In the early stage of the development of the public library, education departments of government retained oversight of it. Though that structural aspect of library governance has changed, in that public libraries are not generally under the control of departments or boards of education, respondents stated that the main purpose of libraries is to encourage and facilitate learning. The kind of learning that goes on in the public library was diverse, according to the respondents, but the primary kind of learning, and the most appropriate in their estimation, was related to conventional literacy: reading and writing.

### Social Levelling and “Filling the Gaps”

Although learning was properly a primary focus of the public library, according to respondents in the interviews and focus groups it has another major purpose. The library was also described as functioning as a kind of social services hub, a place in which “social levelling” may occur. Access to and use of technology in the library should support disadvantaged groups, such as the economically disadvantaged, for example, or those with reduced mobility or vision. One library staff member said: “One library I [visited] the other day is the only public facility in that community. They have a real need for a safe public place for kids to come to and kids who have maybe not the best home lives either. They first started off with just being a warm welcoming place.”

In the same way that learning was to be limited by literacy, limits were established for the social-levelling activities in the library. Libraries were
intended to “fill the gaps” in society, that is, to contribute to only selected social-levelling activities. In turn, the selection of these activities was to be accomplished by reference to literacy as the primary function of the library. The library in Prairietown, for instance, has its own family literacy department, which maintains relationships with social service agencies. Literacy was linked to wider social and economic needs that the library was reported to be in a good position to address. One social service worker said that the library is for kids who are learning about the written word and its relationship to the spoken word: “I encourage my clients to go and utilize [library] programs because they are really good. Children interact there in their age group and read the story or they hear the story to be read to them or do some other activities.”

In summary, when respondents considered the space of the public library in relation to the adoption of new technologies, they reported on the ideal of a free and open space in which universal access to the citizenry is assured and a broad range of activities is to be encouraged. Learning and social levelling were two important means by which the public library accomplishes its socially progressive goals. Having described and endorsed a broadly inclusive space for the public library, respondents used literacy and the filling of gaps as a discursive means of limiting the purposes for which technology might be used in the public library. As a complement to the community network, the public library may therefore be in a good position, in terms of community views, to encourage and provide opportunities for interaction and learning through the use of video conferencing and other technologies and to contribute to social levelling.

**USING TECHNOLOGY TO EXPAND SPACE IN THE PUBLIC LIBRARY**

The welcoming approach expressed by respondents extended to the virtual spaces opened up by the Internet workstations and information databases available in the public library. However, concern was expressed that some activities involving interaction using technology (exchange of messages via email, for example) were not fulfilling the proper role of the public library, which was to provide information. A library employee in Isletown put it this way: “The teenagers are doing the informal chatting and the emailing and to me that’s more recreational, which is a perfectly valid function in the library, but I guess I look forward to it being more truly informational.”

However, this was not exclusively the view that respondents provided. In Centretown, which was the largest and most technologically advanced of the four research sites, the executive director of the local museum stated...
that libraries had an obligation to introduce and encourage technological literacies: “I think the public library here generally has a responsibility to bring a whole range of knowledge and information to make it acceptable to the community. . . . That’s meant the traditional means of information, like books, but it also now means a variety of other ways of making information available to people.”

Professional librarians, because of their training, education, and professional norms, may be expected to be supportive of unconventional access to knowledge and interaction in the public library. Other respondents consistently invoked conventional literacy as a means of limiting the adoption of technology in the library. To explain the resistance to developing technological literacies in the public library, the historical place of the library must be considered. For respondents, the “story” of the public library in their community and on a personal basis began in childhood and youth. At that time, books were the symbol of the enchanted space of the public library. Given the sometimes romantic tinge to respondents’ narratives, it is perhaps not surprising that moving away from books and conventional literacy was seen as undesirable, or at least difficult to imagine or justify.

COMMUNITY OPPORTUNITIES FOR INFORMATION SEEKING IN THE PUBLIC LIBRARY

Social Context
Respondents stated that information seeking could be enhanced through the use of ICTs. A member of the public library board in Collegetown said that the library should adopt “technology to access information at the library or possibly from the library or maybe from their business. They would be able to connect to the library right from there and maybe they could even get some kind of help directly online or directly over voice, voice over IP, from the library staff.”

As with the themes of learning and social levelling, respondents limited the use of information technology by referring to the social context of the public library. The economic development officer in Isletown, for example, linked the passage of time to the library’s inability to provide the information people need: “I don’t have kids at home anymore, but when they were at school, the library was one of the tools used, although as they got higher in their education, they turned more to the Internet for research. There just isn’t the capacity in rural libraries to provide the resource material they need.”

In other words, the public library was for certain kinds of information, but not for all kinds of information. The social context of the public library was limited, in that it shapes the kind of information that should be made
available. Respondents identified information that would be of interest and use mainly to disadvantaged groups as particularly relevant to the public library’s information resources.

Decommodification and Interlibrary Sharing
As respondents considered the potential adoption of technology in the public library, they referred to the library’s traditional function in taking information, knowledge, and cultural products “out” of the economic market. The process of decommodification was linked to the character of the public library as a free and open space and not to the influence of new technology. In decommodifying information, knowledge, and cultural products, the public library was able in part to fulfill its mandate for social levelling. An additional aspect of decommodification that the library accomplishes is as part of a network of libraries in the region and beyond. Respondents noted that the broader access represented by interlibrary sharing was part of the appeal of the public library. The director of a social service agency in Forestville stated that sharing through libraries made information more accessible. When she was seeking a book, “[librarians] might not have it in the library but they can bring it in and that is really valuable.”

Community Opportunities for Interaction in the Public Library
Interaction in the public library is facilitated and encouraged in part through the information technology of the public library. The three kinds of interaction opportunities that technology provides are new information channels (for example, video conferencing), redistribution of access among users (that is, the enfranchisement of groups that previously did not have access), and new information. In discussing the opportunities for interaction in the public library, respondents suggested that the first and third of these opportunities, new information channels and new information, would be desirable outcomes of the adoption of a new technology. These channels and information would be for everyone. The theme of the universality of the library’s audience and group of users was given support in suggestions that the library should be “more proactive . . . so that [it is] available for everybody.”

However, as they described the new information channels and information that the public library could make available, respondents emphasized the second of the opportunities for interaction, that of redistribution of access. Redistribution of access means a reconfiguration of an existing pool of resources, in this case the public library’s space, technology, information seeking opportunities, and interaction channels. In adopting a technology,
the public library would, in broad terms, move access from an existing group of users to a new group, primarily groups considered disadvantaged in some way. Respondents did not state directly and explicitly that redistribution was desirable. Instead, the analysis of the transcripts revealed two clear, separate, and related views. The first was that the scope and scale of the public library in the community should remain the same. In other words, its budget and resources should not significantly be increased. Second, any technology that would be adopted, such as video conferencing, should be provided primarily for the benefit of the disadvantaged, or groups that did not now have access to the technology. The list of the groups to which access could be redistributed was long, but included Brownies, families involved in home-schooling, literacy programs, and the schools. One library staff member said: “[Using technology,] there is potential for classes. . . . We have home-schoolers all throughout the province, so I could see that that would be something that they would really latch onto.”

When they considered new opportunities for interaction in the public library that technology could make possible, respondents referred to reconfiguration—not expansion—of the existing opportunities for interaction. They stated that redistribution of access should be the primary means by which change should take place. In adopting a technology, the public library would shift access from one group of users to another, rather than enhancing or expanding access overall.

**PROSPECTS FOR THE COMPLEMENTARY ROLES OF PUBLIC LIBRARIES AND COMMUNITY NETWORKS**

As an ideal, the public library was regarded by respondents as a “solution” to a host of “problems” of disadvantaged groups. The problems included access to information and learning opportunities, income disparities, and illiteracy. Through a comparison of the library ideal with actual practices, limits were placed on the extent to which technology could appropriately be used to address these problems. The relationship of the various themes is represented in the conceptual framework provided in figure 18.1. The discursive contradiction represented by the figure reveals that a significant barrier to the wider use of technology in the public library is connected to a view of the public library as not fully a site for interaction and the exchange of ideas but rather primarily as a repository for the printed word and for information seeking. This is a barrier to immediate collaboration between the public library and the community network. The purpose of identifying discursive contradictions is in part to uncover them for actors within and outside the research site as a means of encouraging further dialogue and possible change.
The *library ideal* is suggested by the themes of the free, open space of the library, along with its functions of social levelling and decommodification. The themes of the library ideal are shown in figure 18.1 to be in a state of constant comparison to *current library practices*. These practices involve the use of the library as a centre for learning, by the social context in which information is made available and by the sharing that libraries make possible through, for example, interlibrary loans and the common use of space and technology. It is noteworthy that the library ideal is complementary to and in harmony with the social ideals of the community network (Buré 2006). The conceptual framework presented in figure 18.1 could therefore be the starting point for considering a renewed collaboration between the public library and the community network. Such a collaboration could include the participation of disadvantaged groups as well as active and less active users of the public library, in addition to non-users, that is, those who were not part of the “community of practice” forming the sample for this study.

The comparison of the library ideal to current library practices contributes to the development of the themes identified under the category of the *meaning of library practices*. I have noted that respondents made a distinction when they referred to users of the public library, who were generally described as “other people.” Prospective change in the public library’s role or activities, including the potential adoption of new technology, would entrench this distinction.
by allowing the library to serve disadvantaged groups more exclusively. The functions of social levelling and decommodification, seen in another area of the discourse as part of the ideal of the public library, are limited by regarding literacy as the main form of social levelling and learning that takes place in the library and by the selective “filling of gaps.”

In emphasizing conventional literacy and services to the disadvantaged, the public library may paradoxically reduce the likelihood that it will strengthen its role as a site within the community network. The community network as a movement affirms such goals as social levelling and decommodification through such initiatives as providing free or subsidized Internet access to community members and by exploring the use of open source software. However, in the public library the anticipated practices after technology adoption are limited or bounded by community members themselves. According to community members, technology may be properly used in the public library only when it supports the use of print materials (i.e., reading, writing, and conventional literacy) and to assist in redistributing access to interactive activities in the library, as opposed to expanding them. Respondents explored many existing and potential capacities of the public library in the context of new technologies, but they also identified limits on how technology should be used in the library. As a consequence, my second finding is that assessments of the value of technology adoption in the public library depend on a process by which individuals and groups alternate between what I’ve called in this chapter the welcoming and unwelcoming approaches to technology.

**CONCLUSION**

The question of how community video conferencing and other new technologies might find a home in the public library has been considered in this chapter to the extent that a discursive contradiction among the public library’s stakeholders has been identified. Although community members expressed limits to the expansion of technology in the public library, two of the communities visited as part of this study subsequently considered expanding the public library space for the community, in part as a response to some of the issues raised in this study. In one instance, a new library building has been constructed. The design of the new space incorporates provision for flexible deployment of technologies in the future.

In order to create the conditions in which community networks may collaborate meaningfully with community networks, community views and opinions of the public library as a free and open space must deepen. They must take into account the practices, processes, and artifacts by which that ideal is maintained, including the ongoing adoption of ICTs for public use.
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