A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE COMMUNITY ACCESS PROGRAM
From Community Economic Development to Social Cohesion to Digital Divide

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First introduced in 1995, the Community Access Program (CAP) was one of the cornerstones of the federal government’s Connecting Canadians agenda. Industry Canada (2010) described CAP as a program that “aims to provide Canadians with affordable access to the Internet and the skills they need to use it effectively.” The program’s initial goal was to establish 10,000 community access sites by 2001 so that all Canadians, in communities everywhere, could participate fully in the knowledge-based economy. CAP sites are most commonly located in schools, libraries, community centres, social service centres, and friendship centres and operate through partnerships with provincial or territorial governments and non-profit organizations.

Industry Canada’s Departmental Performance Report for 2005–6 (the last year in which cost breakdowns were reported) showed that the CAP program had cost $337.2 million between 1995–96 and 2005–6 (Treasury Board 2007). A companion program, the CAP Youth Initiative (CAP YI), now funded through Human Resources and Skills Development Canada, provides employment opportunities to Canadians between the ages of 15 and 30 at CAP sites across the country. Assisted by thousands of volunteers, the CAP YI workers are the backbone of the CAP sites, working with immigrants, seniors, youth, First
Nations, the socially and economically disadvantaged—in fact, with anyone needing assistance in negotiating the new communications landscape.

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

Within two years, the goals associated with Connecting Canadians and CAP had expanded well beyond the idea of connectivity as access and the creation of an infrastructure to support economic development to include the goal of connectivity as a vehicle for social cohesion. According to then Minister of Industry John Manley: “Connectedness is about our vision of the Canadian society we want in the 21st century—one with a strong, dynamic, competitive economy, and a strong lifelong-learning culture, but also one that uses connectedness to promote social cohesion, cultural expression and to build new linkages between citizens and government” (Manley 1999). This might be described as the “golden age” of connectivity policy in Canada, when the vision, policy, and financial support mechanisms aligned to bring about a program that was highly successful and served as a model for similar programs around the world. Unfortunately, the golden age was short lived.

In 2004, the goals of the CAP program were substantially narrowed from the vision Manley described in 1999. The target audience was refocused “to channel limited resources into the communities that have the most pressing needs” (Treasury Board 2007). Internal Industry Canada reports showed that, during the 2005–6 fiscal year, CAP site services were focused on digital divide groups as follows: low income (69%), rural (68%), seniors (59%), francophones (39%), limited education clientele (65%), recent immigrants (37%), Aboriginal Canadians (26%), and persons with disabilities (49%) (Treasury Board 2007).

Despite the differing policy objectives articulated over the years, various evaluations of the CAP program indicated that it regularly exceeded expectations. An extensive 2004 evaluation commissioned by Industry Canada concluded that “CAP has been having success at bridging the gap in public Internet access and capability. There is a consensus that the formal program objectives continue to be relevant” (Ekos 2004, 41). All the same, the CAP program was scheduled to sunset on 31 March 2004. Since then, it has been kept alive on annual renewals, largely in response to intensive grassroots campaigns in affected communities. These efforts have been accompanied by a great deal of uncertainty, however, with program renewal hanging upon a slender thread.
each year. In 2007, for example, the funding that ended on 31 March was not formally renewed until 6 June, leaving CAP site administrators, volunteers, and users across the country in limbo for nine weeks.

In March 2008, the program was shuffled from the Spectrum, Information Technologies and Telecommunications (SITT) branch to the Regional Operations branch of Industry Canada. Supporters hoped that CAP had finally found a good home, now that the program was located within a department tasked with encouraging community economic development, supporting the social economy, and promoting participation in the digital economy. But as Garth Graham, one of the directors of Telecommunities Canada, a national alliance of community networks, cautioned in an email to the group mailing list: “We’ll have to wait to see whether the orphan CAP has now been adopted by loving parents or merely warehoused in foster care.”

Foster care appears to be the case. After 2007–8, CAP no longer appeared in the annual departmental performance reports filed by Industry Canada with the Treasury Board (Treasury Board 2009, 2010). For fiscal year 2009–10, the funds allocated to CAP came not from the Regional Operations branch budget but from a $225-million infrastructure fund, Connecting Rural Canadians, designed specifically to extend broadband coverage to rural and remote areas. This funding was part of a $62-billion Economic Action Plan—the federal government’s response to the 2008 economic crisis. It was a financial “shot in the arm” for an ailing economy, not a fund to support ongoing programs. It was a subtle move that caught little attention until the next shoe dropped.

In the second week of March 2010, CAP administrators across the country began receiving letters advising them that their funding would end on 31 March 2010 unless their sites were more than 25 kilometres from the nearest public library. From a focus on community economic development and social cohesion to the provision of Internet services chiefly for “at-risk” populations, the scope of CAP had now been narrowed further, to a matter of finding short-term solutions to the problem of rural and remote access. The new 25-kilometre requirement would have wiped out a majority of the remaining CAP sites in Canada. Once again, the CAP community marshalled its resources and contacted members of Parliament and the press seeking support. Over an intense three days, the issue was raised during Question Period by members of all three opposition parties in the House of Commons. On 16 March, Iain Marlow, of the Globe and Mail, visited the CAP site at St. Christopher House, a social service agency in downtown Toronto and a CRACIN community partner. In a resulting story, a 38-year-old woman explained how the site was helping her complete high school. “It would be difficult to do any of the programs without computers,” she said. “It ties it all together. You can’t really make a résumé unless you know how to use the Word program” (quoted in Marlow
In a quick turnabout, Minister of Industry Tony Clement announced that there had been a bureaucratic misunderstanding and that the funding had never really been withdrawn. The program was good for another year, but it was again funded through the temporary Connecting Rural Canadians infrastructure program.

Once encompassing 8,800 sites across Canada (Treasury Board 2003), the number of active CAP sites in 2004–5 was 3,786 (Treasury Board 2006) and was probably hovering around 3,000 by 2009. From $30 million per year in its early days, the CAP budget has stood at $14 million since 2004 (Marlow 2010). These funds can be accessed only by established CAP sites; there is no provision for establishing new sites. Without a powerful champion in a governing party, this program “may have used up its nine lives by now,” said Peter Frampton, a member of the Telecommunities Canada board, in an email message to the author. Its long-term status is more uncertain than ever.

John Manley’s 1999 vision of the CAP program as supporter of “social cohesion” and “cultural expression” reflected the policy environment of the time. According to Canadian policy analyst Jane Jenson, definitions of social cohesion include the concept of a process, or set of processes, leading to the development of a community based on shared values, mutual recognition, and a sense of belonging. Of particular interest to the Canadian policy research environment, she suggests, is the definition offered by the federal government’s Policy Research Subcommittee on Social Cohesion: “The ongoing process of developing a community of shared values, shared challenges and equal opportunity within Canada, based on a sense of trust, hope and reciprocity among all Canadians” (Jenson 1998, 29).

Placing the interest in social cohesion in a political context, Jenson argues that the policy focus on social cohesion in the late 1990s stemmed from the government’s recognition that the neoliberal economic policies of the 1980s and 1990s were damaging to communities and societies. As she points out (1998, 7), “Neoliberalism privileges the market for distributing resources and power, seeks to limit the role of the state, and emphasizes individual (and family) freedom as the core value.” Rejecting state action to address social problems, the voluntary sector became, under neoliberalism, “the only legitimate locale for realising collective goals” (1998, 7, emphasis in original). Jenson quotes an observation made by Ronald Hirshhorn (1997) regarding the non-profit sector: “The sector is being compelled to transform itself, frequently along the lines of market principles of the ‘new managerialism; nonprofits have to become more like any ordinary firm, focussed on the bottom line rather than social projects of other parts of their mission” (1998, 7). No doubt many community networking practitioners would immediately agree.

As already noted, a shift of focus from social issues to business operations...
has been the trajectory of community-based networks funded through Industry Canada’s CAP program. In a study based on CRACIN research, Chris Bodnar investigates the status of community networks in the context of an increasingly prevalent social entrepreneurial model that calls for market integration of the non-profit sector:

As the remaining Community Networks explore new funding avenues, some groups are investigating the relationship between fee-for-service options and the financial viability of the organizations. Whether fee-for-service models compromise the nature of Community Networks may require a rethinking of the public good understanding of Community Networks as non-profit organizations. (Bodnar 2007)

For the time being at least, the Canadian policy pendulum has swung back to the neoliberal context described by Jenson. Remaining community networks may be increasingly pushed to seek different partners, or pushed toward the fee-for-service model that Bodnar mentions, or pushed out altogether. The battle for survival is clearly far from won.

NOTE

1 In its heyday, the Connecting Canadians suite of programs was routinely showcased at international gatherings of government officials. The telecentre movement, which was modelled on the CAP experience, is still supported in some countries by Canadian development funds through the International Development Research Centre.

REFERENCES


