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Chapter V

Differential IT Access and Use Patterns in Rural and Small-Town Atlantic Canada

David Bruce
Mount Allison University, Canada

Introduction

Popular press and government rhetoric suggest that there has been steady progress in the extent to which individuals, households, businesses, organizations, and communities are using the Internet as part of their daily lives (Bruce, 1998, 1997). However, there is little empirical evidence to support this claim. In this chapter I argue that there has been slow and uneven penetration of Internet use in rural and small-town communities in Atlantic Canada, despite the best efforts of policies and programs. Drawing on evidence from a recent Internet use survey, suggestions are made for improving the performance of policies and programs aimed at increasing Internet access and use.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an empirical overview of differential Internet access and use patterns, using data collected from a January 1998 survey (Jordan, 1998; Bruce and Gadsden, 1999) of 1501 households in 20 different Atlantic Canadian communities grouped into five distinct "community categories." (Reimer, 1997a, 1997b)

Characteristics of users for purposes of this analysis include age, gender, household income, educational attainment, and employment status. This chapter also explores the extent to which Atlantic Canadians have taken formal or informal courses or training programs related to information technology between 1993 and 1998.

Background

Information technology-related policies, programs, and strategies are being articulated and developed in large part in response to a new economic reality in rural

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Canada. Resource-based sectors, such as agriculture, forestry and fisheries, are no longer the main source of wealth generation in an increasing number of rural communities. The service sector has replaced the resource sector as the most important employer of the workforce, accounting for two-thirds of employment. Small businesses, in particular those in the service sector, dominate business operations in rural Canada (BICON, 1998).

In response to this changing economic environment, it has been noted that technology is releasing significant opportunities for marginalized communities, and the implication is that appropriate enabling policies and programs can further those opportunities:

> Technology is not a release from the burden of place, but rather a tool to respond to the challenge and opportunities of the "local." In this context there is an opportunity to be productive and economically vital, not by being "anywhere," but precisely by being "somewhere," and particularly by being part of larger distributed networks where "place" is a "resource" not a burden. (Gurstein, 1999)

The Internet has great potential as a development tool (for connecting people, for electronic commerce, as a medium for distance education, for the delivery of government services, and much more); however, for a community to take advantage of the opportunities presented, many people from all segments of the community must be connected. Likewise, government services delivered online, and electronic transactions of commercial activity, can only be effective and used widely if many are connected.

Further to the issue of "being connected" is the public policy agenda attached thereto. Nationally the federal government has articulated a "Connecting Canadians" agenda to make Canada the most connected nation in the world by the year 2000. Strategic thrusts include establishing community access points across the nation, furthering electronic commerce activities, putting more government information online, and much more. Of particular interest here is the Community Access Program, designed to provide thousands of rural communities across the country with a public location for community members to use the Internet, access training and services, and build interest in the use of Internet for personal and business use. Launched in 1996, the program has made funding available to more than 1,000 communities. Each of the communities involved in the survey which forms the basis of this discussion has such an access centre.

The federal government undertook a major consultation with rural Canadians (Rural Secretariat, 1999) from May to July 1998, to solicit information on the issues and challenges they faced, and their suggestions for appropriate government roles in helping to address those issues. Ten critical issues were identified, one of which was to improve rural telecommunications and increase the of use of the information highway. Other priority areas which could be addressed through increased access to and use of the Internet include developing opportunities for rural youth, improving access to education, improving access to information on government programs and services, and increasing the economic diversification in rural communities.

Within Atlantic Canada each of the provincial governments has developed its

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