

Topic Title: Education and Communication for Rural Community Sustainability

Discussion and implementation of digital communication in Newfoundland and Labrador began on a positive note in the 1980s with the support of the Economic Recovery Commission (ERC) and Richard Fuchs. The vision was for the internet to bring a new age of positive development to rural NL.

The Economic Recovery Commission (ERC) in practice tried to carry out a future looking positive vision for the outports. Richard Fuchs (later an ERC executive director) advised the Royal Commission: *Building On Our Strengths: the Royal Commission on Employment and Unemployment, 1986.*

“A concerted effort needs to be made to transfer these technologies to rural residents in order that they become computer literate in their interaction with the urban sector. Government would be well advised to begin the transfer of this technology through the structure of rural Development Associations and local governments as a component of both its new policy of post-secondary educational decentralization and its longstanding policy of rural development. Put simply, if rural areas are able to negotiate, cajole and influence public policy in the service sector, they will need an information network among themselves which makes decisions affecting their lives. If the revolution in computer technology is to be interactive, rather than extractive, the rural resident seated in front of the video monitor will have to know the language of exchange.” (House, p. 84, 1999)

For a short period, NL seemed about to lead the world in the adaption of community computer networks. ERC working through the Newfoundland and Labrador Development Corporation “initiated the establishment of the Enterprise Network, an electronic information and telecommunications support system that would begin to realize the commission's vision of 'electronic villages' in rural Newfoundland and Labrador.” (House, p. 13, 1999.)

Fuchs took a leading role and Rural Telecentres were established across the province later to be accompanied by the nation wide Community Access program. The Enterprise Network was Canada’s first rural online service and introduced North America’s first rural telecentres. The Enterprise Network offered two essential rural informatics services, an online, dial-up, electronic information and communications service (began in 1990) and a system of six rural telecentres (began in 1989).

However, in a neocolonial governance system, the ERC call for citizen participation and decentralized decision making could perhaps be described as an Achilles Heel. “A historic weakness of Newfoundland and Labrador society has been its underdeveloped municipal level of government and over dependence on state officials, whether from Great Britain, mainland Canada, or the city of St. John’s. The royal commission argued strongly for greater decentralization of political and economic decision-making from both the federal and provincial governments to community and regional organizations, and greater decentralization within government agencies and departments themselves. This would be central to reducing dependency on government and achieving greater self-reliance.” (House, p 24. 1999.)

In the late 90s zeitgeist, our west coast collaboration *Sharing Our Future/Partager Notre Avenir* through the Office of Learning Technologies became a participant in Global Congresses on Community

Networking. It was a positive era with individuals and groups around the world convinced it was possible to have a digital future “For the People”. There were three congresses in Barcelona, Buenos Aires and Montreal.

A few weeks ago, I participated in a meeting of Telecommunities Canada directors called to respond to a questionnaire from the United Nations Commission on Science and Technology for Development (CSTD) Questionnaire for 20-year review of World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) implementation.

“Over the past 20 years, we suggest that the Information Society envisioned has actually moved away from a people-centered, inclusive, development-oriented society towards a corporate-centered profit-oriented society. The Information Society is still about people but, in the shift from people in a community context to people in a market context, we have allowed market values to drive human values, leaving out a broad spectrum of human values that exist in communities. There is an urgent need to move to a more balanced society in which communities represent the organizational capacity, identity and form that can countervail some of the impacts of market-driven policies.

“Digital equity is a goal that remains elusive in the Information Society. Access, affordability, useability, local support, education programs – all the things that are needed to be a participating citizen in the 21st century – are still not ubiquitous, although they are certainly much improved from even 5 years ago. We do not know to what extent implementation of WSIS outcomes contributed to this improvement, but we do know that the job is far from completed and that digital equity needs to head any future list of priorities.”

“Fundamentally, this is about fairness – the ability for everyone to participate in the benefits the Internet can offer. The corporate/market centered society is focussed on profitability, not fairness. This is a public policy issue that requires immediate attention and investment. Citizens and governments at all levels must prioritize social values in the Information Society. “

“ From 2020 to 2022, the world was responding to the pandemic using the tools that enabled them to communicate and grow and these new patterns have become part of daily life around the world. The Internet has become, more than ever before, an essential tool for participation in the public and private lives of citizens around the world.”

As a Telecommunities Canada director, I agree with the content of the questionnaire to the UN commission. It also reflects my experience in rural NL. The expertise exists in rural NL to create positive change as demonstrated by the (at the time) community owned Burgeo Broadcasting system and its creation of a long range wireless internet system to connect outports on the sou’west coast. The motivation was not profit for corporations but rather improved health care and education.

So again the challenge is governance, ownership and local control.

It might seem a major effort to challenge the double helix of major capitalist corporations and a supporting neocolonial provincial government (which advocates the relocation of rural communities) but a Transdisciplinary approach to Transformation should be an encouragement.

When I asked Calvin what I considered as the battle with the federal government (Trudeau's white paper in 1969), he said it was an Awakening for indigenous people across the country. (Calvin White, personal communication, 2021).

Is it not possible to vision a similar Awakening in Newfoundland and Labrador to guarantee the sustainability of rural outports?

What next?

1. During this event, we can discuss the possibility of Grenfell Campus joining the First Mile Consortium.
2. Calvin has offered to facilitate a face to face south west Newfoundland participatory community dialogue.
3. Governance interviews across the province. Including M'Kmaq self governance.
4. Digital surveys of internet and mobiles in western Newfoundland.
5. Participatory evaluation of the project.
6. Hybrid e-portfolio.
7. Research the archives.